Caelevoria

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Caelevoria

By Gennie

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Chapter 1

Caelevoria - chapter 1

Okay, this is my first time posting...I've been working on this story, on and off, for a while now. Time to find out if it's any good, I suppose...

Let me know what you think!

~Chapter 1~

"God I'm so sick of school." My best friend, Callie, sighs as she drops her enormous pile of Calculus homework on the lunch table.

"You know, they don't have school in Caelevoria." Now all of my friends sigh.

"Do you have to bring that stupid book into every single conversation?" My friend Aaron casts a tired glance my way. I can't blame him; this is definitely deja vu as far as conversations go.

"What's...Kay...le-what-ia?," asks Trish. She just moved here, so I can forgive her for not at least hearing of this book. She must have lived under a rock in...wherever she used to live.

"Don't-," about 5 of my friends start, but I'm too fast for them. "It's only the best book in the entire world. I highly suggest you get a copy and read it. It will be a life-changing experience, no joke."

"You see, Trish; Sage is obsessed. She found Caelevoria a couple years ago in the library, and she hasn't stopped talking about it since," Callie explains. I think about objecting, but she's being quite honest. She didn't even mention that I bought my own copy soon after, and have carried it around with me for the past two years. I shrug and sit down. I can't see how my friends don't love this book as much as I do. It's set in the beautiful kingdom of Caelevoria, with quiet forests and rolling hills, medieval-style villages,

and cities and castles - the stuff fairy tales are made of. The characters are so realistic, it feels like I've known them my entire life. There are the proud princes and princesses, queens and kings; young squires and fair maidens; dragons, elves, and fairies; witches, both good and evil; and even a horrible villain - a warlock, and the usurper of a neighboring kingdom's throne, trying to take over the land of Caelevoria for himself. The best character, however, is the main character, a knight named Artemis. He's brave and strong, and - after some slight moral dilemmas near the end of the seventeenth chapter - saves the day in the end like any good hero should.

Oh well, most people don't recognize pure genius, even when it's right in front of their nose. I just wish I could find someone who loved this book as much as I do - or even better, go there! Countless nights I've dreamed of seeing the cities, riding a dragon, meeting Artemis - geez, I better stop thinking like this or I'll only make school seem more depressing. I'll stick with wishing for someone who loves Caelevoria like I do. Then I'd have someone to talk to about it who wouldn't roll their eyes and groan when ever I

mentioned it. I just want someone to understand that I use Caelevoria as an escape - it's my escape from school, from homework, from all my troubles; most of all, it's an escape from my boring life.

I'm not going to say that my life is horrible, or that I can't stand one more minute of it. My life is, in all honesty, completely average. I'm an average girl of 16. I'm not gorgeous, but I'm definitely not ugly. Sure, my friends and I can be pretty crazy, but in all appearances, I'm completely run-of-the-mill: Average brown hair and normal blue eyes. I'm not even tall - or short - for my age. I've always been an average height and weight and everything else. Most people couldn't pick me out of a crowd. But like I said, this is all appearances. If you set aside my normal exterior, I'm a little on the weird side, but then again, who isn't? Which is why my average life sometimes gets frustrating.

For example: my family is very normal. My parents have pretty average jobs (my mom's a vet and my dad is a teacher at the local middle school). They're nowhere near as weird as I am, though they do have

their quirks. We have a pretty average house, too. My town even, believe it or not, reflects my average life perfectly. Nothing amazing and extraordinary ever happens in our little town, but that's okay. I usually like having a quiet, small town life. Our town is small enough that everyone knows everyone else, so there's always someone there if you need them. I have some good classes in school this year and a lot of them are with my friends, so even school isn't the hell it seems it used to be. So as much as I complain about how I'd love to get out of here and go to Caelevoria, I do like my life.

Today, in particular, is going to be good. It's about a week after that conversation at the lunch table, in which I introduced Caelevoria to Trish (poor, deprived girl!). I've refrained from mentioning my book to my friends lately, as much as I possibly can. I've gotten sick of all of their sighs and rolled eyes. And I guess I can understand where they're coming from. They just don't relate to Caelevoria like I do, so of course they don't want to hear about it all the time.

Anyway, back to my day. I can't really say how I know, but I just have this feeling that today is going to be amazing, extraordinary even. I wake up right as my alarm goes off. This is unusual in and of itself, since usually I come groggily awake, turn my alarm off, and fall back asleep; only to wake up to my mom or dad yelling up the stairs at me a few minutes later. As I jump in the shower, I feel particularly energetic and awake. I get out with enough time to have a bowl of cereal for breakfast, which I don't always do, I'll admit. I know adults are always going on about three meals a day and how important breakfast is, but the average teen really doesn't always have time to get a good meal in every morning. And as I said, I am quite the average teen. So with this great start to my day, I head off to school. We only live about a block away from my high school, so I walk to school each day. Callie only lives two houses down from me, so I meet her on the sidewalk just outside of her house.

Callie and I, though we have startlingly similar personalities, look nothing alike. We both have brown hair, sure, but that's where the similarities end. While my hair is fairly straight and a boring,

dirty brown, of a medium length, her hair is gorgeous - it has a slight reddish tint to it and flows all the way down her back. Add to this her graceful figure, slender face, and eyes of a brighter green than anyone would think possible, and she's quite beautiful; a fact which is supported by the constant attention that she receives from a wide array of guys at our school. Still, looks don't matter in real friendship, a fact which we've proved by being friends since elementary school.

"You appear to be in a good mood this morning." Callie says to me as she walks up the path from her front door. She knows me far too well - she can always tell how I'm feeling, and visa versa, which has never been a problem with us. We share everything with each other. As we start walking she says, "It's only 7:30 in the morning, and we're on our way to the torture that they cunningly disguise as the public school system, and you are ecstatic. Why?"

"I am. And there's no use in asking why, because I really have no clue. I just woke up in a good mood." I shrug as we start walking up the walkway to the

front door of our high school - West Seneca High. Go jaguars!

"Alright, alright, don't get all defensive or anything. It's okay if you loooovveee school. I won't hold it against you." She draws out love so mockingly I can't decide whether I want to grin or hit her. I do both.

"Haha right! Like there's any room in my heart to love school. I'm already in love with-"

"That Arty guy from your book, I know. I know." She really does know me too well. "You know that sort of thing is really unhealthy. It's not normal to have a crush on a fictional character. You're going to grow up and live all by yourself...If you call having 57 cats living alone, that is. Everyone will call you the crazy cat lady and you'll still be in love with someone who's never even existed!"

"Okay, it's not just 'that Arty guy'; you know I love all of Caelevoria. And I won't be a crazy cat lady. There has to be at least one guy on the planet who appreciates that book like I do. And when I find him, we'll fall madly in love and make love like bunny rabbits. We'll have 57 kids, not cats, and they'll call

me the crazy...kid lady. Or something. And we'll name all of our kids after characters from 'my book'. It'll be a good time, I promise." I get all of this out with a perfectly straight face and then burst out laughing. Callie's been laughing at me since 'bunny', and she's laughing so hard by the time we reach the door that she has to lean on me to make it through. I love having such a great best friend - we have enough insanity between the two of us that it's certainly never boring.

As we get into school and sit with our friends, nothing amazing really happens, but we do have a good time. This is why I love the mornings - the fifteen minutes or so before the bell rings when I get to talk with all of my friends without worrying about classes or anything. All of school should be exactly like this.

But then the bell rings, and it's off to class we go. I have my first class of the day, English, with both Callie and Aaron. We grab some seats at the back like usual, and class goes by pretty fast. We're reading one of those old plays by some old dead guy that no

one has actually heard of, and all three of us get a part. Some kids hate reading in class, but with the three of us it becomes an amusing game - see who can be the most dramatic in their reading, without bursting out in laughter halfway through every line. The game gets more challenging as we progress, and by the end of the period we have the entire class in fits of laughter. Ahh, the beautiful language of English.

None of my other classes today are quite as interesting, though there is a slight episode in lunch when Callie is convinced that there is a talon on her vegetarian pizza...but it turns out to only be an extremely odd piece of onion. Luckily, my classes aren't especially boring today; at least, time doesn't seem to be dragging twice as slow as usual, like it tends to do during school. So I get through all of my classes with no more than the usual amount of bore. And even with less bore, I still managed to get about twice as much homework as usual. I expected homework from Physics and Calculus, of course, but not from English and Art, too!

So by the time school is over, my good mood of the morning hasn't quite rubbed off, but it's certainly dimmed a little. Callie and I are heading over to my house to hang out like usual. Aaron lives just a couple blocks away, while the rest of our friends live in the other two towns that form our school district, so a lot of times after school it's just the three of us. He catches up to us just outside the front doors of the school, and flips his dark hair back from his eyes in that oh-so-casual way he does, more for effect than to clear his vision. I've been sure for over a year now that he's madly in love with Callie, which is why he hangs out with us so much, but Callie won't hear a word of it. She seems so sure that I'm wrong, but she doesn't have any proof to back it up. Then again, I don't have proof for my claims either, so she might have a point. Oh well, it's great hanging out with the two of them, whatever the reason.

"Heyyy ladieees," Aaron croons at us as he comes up between us and puts his arms around our shoulders.

"Oh knock it off you-"

"Don't say anything you'll regret, girls!" As he says this he takes one look at our stern faces and he starts to pout, very convincingly. He's kinda cute when he widens his deep brown eyes just like that. Just a little. "Fine, I'll just leave you two alone.

At this, we all burst out laughing, since Aaron has threatened to stop hanging out with us about twice a day from the day we all started hanging out. As that was about three years ago, we know by now it's an empty threat. I think it started off as a way of getting attention from us (and by us, I mean Callie) but by now it's just a long-standing joke. We all head to my house in good spirits, which are only improved my the fact that my mom went grocery shopping just yesterday.

"Junk food!" Aaron exclaims as he digs through our cupboards, and then the fridge. He is like a human trash-compactor, eating anything and everything. Callie and I follow in his pursuit for snacks; it's been a long day, and junk food makes everything better.

We crash on on the sofas with our chips and sodas, wrestling over the bag and drinking deep between

mouthfuls of our salty snacks. This is one of of my favorite times of the day - when I get to hang out with my two best friends and recover from all the trials of the school day. We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes, with only the crunching of the chips and the crinkling of the bag disturbing the quiet. Then Callie abruptly jumps up and announces that she has to pee. "Thanks for the information. We just love to be informed for all of your body's natural functions. Please, let us know more."

She grins wryly at me. "Well, if you insist, I can share plenty more. I've been holding it for a while, y'know. And I was thinking I'd go now so I could also blow my nose and maybe clip my toenails and-"

"OKAY! We get the point! Just go to the freaking bathroom already. God." If I didn't know any better, I'd think Aaron was getting grossed out by all this talk, but he's grinning too as he says all of this.

"Oh, Aaron, you don't have to call me God. I know you think very highly of me, but really, just call me Callie." She pauses, and looks at us for a moment. Aaron looks as if he's not sure whether to laugh or

protest at her joke. She doesn't give him the chance. "Fine, I'll go pee. Be right back." We watch her leave and then Aaron turns to me.

"Yeesh, what a weirdo. Remind me again why we hang out with her?"

"Because she's our bestest friend in the whole world?" At his glance, I add, "and because she's the only one in school crazy enough to deal with both of us all the time?"

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten." He hasn't stopped grinning since she left the room.

A silence stretches between us. Comfortable, but silence nonetheless. On a whim, I lean back in the cushions and close my eyes, imagining myself falling into the arms of Artemis, and riding off into the sunset with him. Oh how I'd love to see the world of Caelevoria, even just once. I'd ride dragons across the mountains, and learn the secrets of elfin medicine, and-

"What's wrong?" Aaron's voice is rather closer than I expected and I jump a little as he says this. I open my

eyes to find him right in front of me, looking concerned.

"Woah, give a girl a little space, eh? Nothing's wrong, I'm just a little tired I guess. I didn't sleep in like usual today. I guess the lack of those extra ten minutes is catching up with me all of a sudden."

"You know, now that I think about it...You looked less tired and more like you were daydreaming, to me." He looks at me slightly suspiciously (and also a little like he's holding back laughter).

"Okay, okay. You caught me. I was thinking about Caelevoria. No surprises there, I know. Jeez."

"Whoa, no need to get so defensive!" He's not even bothering to hold back his laughter anymore. "What was it this time, fairies? Or your precious knight?"

I glare at him for a moment. I guess Aaron's starting to get to know me a little too well, too. I sigh, and think for a moment. I don't want him to know he's right. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response. You could never comprehend the complex world of Caelevoria. You wouldn't understand."

It's late, and I'm procrastinating as usual. I'm really good about getting my homework in on time, but it usually involves me waiting to start it until about eight o'clock on the night before it's due. This leads to me getting very little sleep sometimes, as I have to stay up to the wee hours of the morning to get it done. Still, I've never learned to change my habits, so I still procrastinate almost every evening.

Tonight is especially bad. Partly because of the massive amounts of homework that I obtained throughout the day, and partly because the good mood that lasted me most of the day has finally worn off all the way. Nothing amazing happened today, nothing at all. In every sense it was just another normal day. I don't know why this is such a letdown to me, since I didn't even know for sure that anything was going to happen. I just had that feeling in the morning that today was meant to be amazing.

So it's getting late, and I'm not even halfway finished with all of my work. I've read the next scene in our play for English, and I did my Calculus assignment, but I still have to draw my sketches for Art and do

some workbook problems for physics. I've currently reached the stage in my homework where I give up on figuring out those obscure physics problems with eggs, cannons, and pillows, and start finding my favorite quotes from Caelevoria. I've just found one of my favorite scenes (where Artemis defeats the evil warlock, Bartholemy), when I see a streak of light go past my window. A shooting star! Now I'm a firm believer of making wishes - no matter how many times it turns out that they don't come true - so I put down my book and close my eyes. I wish to see Caelevoria, just once; wish with every fiber of my being. I wish so hard that I feel almost dizzy, and I get a chill down my spine. When I open my eyes again, it's pitch black in my room, so dark that I can't see a thing! Wait - I don't remember there being crickets chirping outside my window a minute ago. It's getting late in the fall, yet the noises from outside sound as if it was a hot summer night. As my eyes start to adjust to the darkness, I can almost imagine beautiful trees around my room, with a quiet little clearing in the center...I can practically feel the grass under me, and smell the flowers on the breeze.

But it's all in my imagination, and my room quickly comes back into focus again, as the night outside becomes silent once more. Or was it silent all along, and the crickets inside my head? Oh well; I switch my light back on with a sigh. It goes off like that sometimes because the wiring in our house is beyond ancient. It just had to have such bad timing to go off right when I was making my wish. I stare at my physics book for a few moments, but can't quite work up the willpower to pick up my pencil and add more to the equation I've been working on. I think it's time to call it a night. I'll just have to finish my homework in the morning. I pick up Caelevoria one more time to dog-ear the page I'm on, and set it on my night stand. I switch off the lights and settle a little deeper under my covers. As I'm drifting off to dreamland, my last thoughts differ from my usual fantasies of talking with witches or becoming a princess in Caelevoria, but center instead around the beautiful clearing I had almost imagined only a few minutes before.

Chapter 2

Caelevoria - chapter 2

~Chapter 2~

It's been about two weeks since I made my wish on the shooting star; two weeks since the amazing day that-was-not. And my life has been plodding along at his usual pace, normal as ever. Not only was I wrong about my day being great, but it seems that I've jinxed myself into not having any more great days, ever again. Or that's what it feels like. I didn't think my life could get any more normal than it had been, but at least I used to have some great times mixed in here and there. These past two weeks have been nothing but boring and average.

But today is a Saturday, and I'm determined to have a good time. It's not just that there is no school to deal with, but also that I'm hanging out with Aaron and Callie for a good portion of the day. I leave my house in a decent mood. I'm not expecting too much, but we're going to a local stand of trees to explore. We've been through here many times before, but it's been years since Callie and I went roaming through the roots and shrubs, looking for frogs and snakes. There's also a small - but fairly deep - stream that runs through the trees where we used to splash around for salamanders, and just to get wet. We haven't really hung out here since we became friends with Aaron, so we decided to take a trip down memory lane and introduce him to our old romping ground.

When I get to Callie's house, she doesn't come running out to meet me like she usually does. I pause for a moment and then go up to the door and knock. She's usually good about being on time, but maybe she's running late today.

Or not.

"Callie won't be able to go with you today, Sage," her mother tells me as she opens the door. "She came down with a nasty bug last night and she's been in bad shape all morning."

"Oh...Well thanks for letting me know Mrs. Benson. Let her know that I'm sorry she's sick, and that I hope she gets better soon!"

"I will, hun. Have a good time today." And with that, she closes the door and I'm on my way. Have a good time?! I know she means well, but I'm not sure how I can have a good time with my best friend sick and all of our plans ruined.

I might as well go tell Aaron that we'll go some other time. No. Hold on a sec. I'm not having another boring, lousy day. I will drag Aaron to those woods even though his precious Callie won't be coming, and we'll find salamanders and lizards and have a good time. I'm determined.

By the time I come to this conclusion, I'm rounding the front walk to his house, so I march right up to the door and knock - a little louder than necessary, I must confess. After a few seconds, the door opens

and Aaron sticks his head out. Before I can tell him the news, he grins and says, "Not by the hairs on my chinny chin chin!"

"What are you talking about??!"

"I thought you were the big bad wolf, trying to knock my house down. You were certainly pounding on the door hard enough."

"Oh," I pause, a little sheepishly (wolfishly?), "sorry about that. Callie's sick and can't make it, but I'm determined to have a good day, and explore all through the trees, and get covered in bug bites and lost in the woods, so you're coming with me whether you like it or not and we're going to have a great time." It all comes out in a rush, and for a second, Aaron looks confused, and a little unsure.

"Whatever you say, boss." He grins at me and grabs his coat from the hook by the door. "Let's go."

We arrive in the woods just a few minutes later, and it's almost better than I remembered it. Everything looks (and sounds, and smells) so green and luscious; I can hardly believe the beauty of it all. We push on

through the undergrowth in silence for a few minutes, until Aaron stumbles upon a blackberry patch.

"OWW," he yells as he gets wrapped up in all of the thorns and vines, "What the hell!?!"

His expression is so funny that I can hardly help myself from laughing as I help him untangle himself. "Good, you found us some snacks!" I tease him as I pause from his rescue to pick some blackberries.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself while I'm being stabbed to death by mother nature, Sage. Don't mind me or anything, just leave me here to die," he says sarcastically. His face forms into one of his characteristic pouts as he whines to me.

"Alright, if you insist." I start to walk off in another direction, ignoring his protests at being left behind. He rips himself out of the bushes soon enough, and catches up to me despite my fast pace.

"I'm bleeding!" He whines again.

I quickly take into account the smears of red on his forearms and legs, and for a minute I'm really

worried about him. Then I remember the tricks I used to pull on my friends when I was little, and reach out and smear my hand across some of his 'blood', immediately licking it off my index finger. "Mmm, you taste good! That is, if you bleed blackberry juice, Aaron..."

He frowns as he realizes that his ploy failed, but then shrugs and continues walking as if nothing happened. "So you and Callie used to come through these woods all the time, eh? What's so great about a bunch of trees and a lot of biting insects?" He slaps a mosquito on his arm for emphasis.

"You'll see..." I tell him. Callie and I never actually told him about the stream, we just made it clear that these woods are a great place to be. "I swear it gets better than this, Aaron. In fact, the best part should be coming up in a just a few seconds..." I can hear the running water through the trees, but can't see the creek yet.

"If you say so, Sage..." Aaron doesn't look impressed yet, but that probably has something to do with the

fact that Callie couldn't make it. He's been far too quiet so far today.

As we continue walking, the stream suddenly makes itself visible between the maples and the oaks. "Here it is," I tell him, "the best spot in the forest."

His jaw drops for a moment as he takes it all in: The beautiful rushing water over a multitude of rounded little stones, the wildflowers growing in clusters around the banks - cattails and swamp iris, black eyed susan and queen anne's lace, goldenrod and forget me nots - the chirping of crickets and frogs and the whistles of birds, and the lack of closely-growing trees and choking weeds. I had forgotten how beautiful this place was (or maybe my ten-year-old-self never really appreciated it), and find my jaw dropping as well. We stand there in silence, just looking around for a few moments, until a big frog jumps into the water with a splash, causing us both to jump. We start laughing at each other, finally breaking the silence of this perfect little world.

"Wow, Sage, you weren't kidding. I can see why you and Callie would spend all your time here when you

were younger. Let me guess, you used to lie in the grass, and pull petals off of flowers. 'He loves me, he loves me not, Artemis loveess me...'" His piercing, falsetto impersonation of me is too funny to even consider getting upset over.

"No, actually-"

"Oh wait, you hadn't read Caelevoria yet, had you? So who did you obsess over before you met...I mean, read about...Your charming prince?"

"If you had let me finish, you would know by now." I pause for a moment to make sure he's not going to interrupt me again. He nods his head impatiently for me to continue. "Callie and I never did anything of the sort. How boring! We preferred to come home from this place covered in mud and grass stains, carrying buckets of frogs and snakes." I grin at him.

"Oh." He looks confused for a second. "You were a tomboy?"

"Damn straight. Why waste childhood being a whiny little girl? Then again, you would know, right Aaron?"

I watch as he looks first confused, and then angry. Finally his face settles into a devilish grin.

"You'll pay for that one, Sage!" Uh oh. "You said you like to come home from this clearing all wet and muddy?!" No. He wouldn't dare.

"No. You wouldn't dare!" He quickly scoots closer to me and slings me over his shoulder. "Aaron, stop it! I was just kidding!! Please, just put me down!"

"If you insist," he says teasingly, and lowers me down, dropping me the last foot or so...Right into the stream.

I splutter for a moment before finding my voice. "YOU ASS! It's freezing in here! AND you've ruined my clothes! I'm never going to get this mud out!"

He looks shocked at first. "I...I thought...that the stream...was shallower than that. I swear." Great, I'm sitting up to my neck in freezing water, squished into disgusting mud, because he misjudged the depth by a couple feet.

"Thanks a lot. At least help me out of here." Now it's my turn to pout, but I certainly have a reason. It's not

exactly steamy hot around here in the fall, and the water is cold. He pulls me up and helps me get out of the sticky mud. When I'm back on safe ground, I hit him hard on the arm. "Don't you EVER do that to me again, you big oaf. You hear me?!"

For once he seems to be actually upset, and doesn't even crack a smile. "I'm absolutely completely sorry, Sage. I can't apologize enough. Is there any chance you can forgive me?"

I look him over and decide that it's not worth the fight. He does look very sorry...My teeth start chattering as I try to form a response. "It-t-t's alr-r-r-right. I'm-m f-f-fine. J-j-just really c-cold. C-can we go home n-now?" I'm almost controlling my shaking by the time I finish speaking.

Aaron, however, looks horrified. "You're going to catch pneumonia like this! I'm so sorry Sage. Here," he shrugs off his coat. "Take my jacket. You need it."

"N-no. I'm f-fine, really. I'm already g-getting warmer."

He looks at me for a second and then leans really close. Talk about personal space issues! What is with this boy? Before I realize what he's doing, he's pulled my soaked jacket right off of me, and laid his over my shoulders. It's so warm; I can't help pulling it closer. "Th-thanks, Aaron. I guess I can w-wear this for a while. It is your fault I'm cold, I suppose." By the end of this my shivers have actually gone away, and I feel just slightly cool.

"It's the least I can do. So you're not mad at me still? Because if you were, I'd totally understand. If there's anything else I can do, just let me know, okay? I feel horrible about ruining your fun plan for the day."

I can't take this whole I'm-so-sorry crap anymore! "Well, now that you mention it..." I pout a little, for effect. He looks worried. "You could carry me the whole way home. And then you could give me a back massage, and do my laundry for me, and I still have some physics homework due Monday that you could help me with. And...hmm. Could I borrow some cash?"

As I rattle off my list, a smile starts to creep back on his face, and by the end of my speech he's grinning. "If you insist..." He scoops me back up in his arms and starts walking off - in the wrong direction.

"Aaron, stop! I was kidding and you damn well know it! So put me down before you get us lost out here!!"

He grins at me and sets me down again. I set off - towards home this time, and he follows closely behind. "I guess it's only fair..." I say, "I ruined your day by forcing you to come without precious Callie along, so you ruined mine by dropping me in muddy water. I guess we're even."

I start to grin up at him, until the look on his face stops me in my tracks. Whoops. I can't believe I forgot that he never actually admits to liking her. I've just had the theory for so long that it's a given in my mind...The cold must be getting to me more than I had thought.

"Um. What are you talking about?" At least he only looks confused and surprised, not angry. He's a pretty good actor!

"Uh..." Think, think, think! "I was just saying...that I dragged you out here...through bugs and thorns...without even Callie...to make up for my stupid comments...and insanity?" Weak ending, but it's the best I can do. This cold really is slowing my brain down.

"Hm. Okay." He looks thoughtful for a bit, so I try to change the subject by sprinting away from him as fast as I can.

"Catch me if you can!"

He's catching up faster than I expected, but every time I glance back I run the risk of smashing my head on branches or tripping over a root, so I just concentrate on running. "Sage! How long do you really think you can outrun me!?" He has a point...

All of a sudden I break through some particularly thick weeds and stumble into a clearing I'd never found before. And yet it looks so familiar! In a rush I realize that this is none other than the clearing from my failed wish, and all of a sudden the whole forest seems to spin around me. The trees, the ground, and the sky seem to whirl together, and nothing makes

sense to my poor brain. As I fall to the ground, I hear a faint call in the distance. "Sage!" the voice says. What a weird thing to be yelling in the middle of the woods.

Chapter 3

Caelevoria - chapter 3

~Chapter 3~

In but a moment, I awake, my head aching as if I fell from a great height. As I stand and smooth out my skirts, I suddenly become aware of another presence in the woods with me, and the hum of a low voice. My heart quickens at the thought of a vicious dragon, or worse yet, a villainous warlock with malicious intent. I must make haste from this deceptively beautiful place. Yet before I may take but one step, a tall boy steps out of the woods, dressed in peasant clothing such as myself.

"Sage," he speaks quietly to himself, "where is that Sage?" At this, my memories return to me: I was returning home when I fell. This young man must have been the voice that I heard! But can I trust such a stranger? Sadly, I have but one choice, for I am lost.

"Sir," I say quietly, but he does not heed my call. "Excuse me, kind sir?" I speak with more force this time, and he starts and stares at me. This young man has flowing dark hair, trimmed just below his temples, and a beautiful face that seems to remind me of an old friend. I shudder, for such faces may accompany the worst kind of villain. He carries with him a large basket filled with herbs and wild plants from the forest. Good, perchance he will know the area.

"Good morrow to you milady," he speaks kindly to me, yet with confusion in his voice, "I am Calder. I live just through these trees, in a modest home with my grandmother. By what means does a fair maiden such as yourself happen to be in a forest such as this?"

I will have to trust in his apparent kindness. "Good morrow to yourself, sir. My name is Kaelyn, and I fear I have become lost. I ventured into the small village of Neme with my father the day before last, seeking to sell our meager harvests. We were returning home when our horse was frightened by a mischievous fairy and broke free of his harness. We ran after him, for we had no other way home, and we became separated. I became frightened myself, and ran too quickly. I stumbled upon this clearing and fell. I awoke but a moment ago, with not a clue as to which direction my home lies. Could you perchance help me, sir?"

"Please, you may call me Calder, miss. Surely I will help you, but it is nearly time for the noonday meal, and my grandmother will be expecting me. Join me in returning to my cottage, and break bread with us. We will help you find your home as soon as we have had our fill."

He seems honest, and I have no other choice but to accept or wander in this vast forest. "Thank you kind

sir-...Calder. I greatly appreciate your help." I hesitate for but a moment. "You may call me Kaelyn."

"Well, Kaelyn, let us be off." We walk side by side as old friends, meandering toward the path into the trees. He continues, "I have but one more herb to collect for my grandmother - you see, she is a great herbalist and healer, but she is not as young as she once was, so I must help her in collecting her materials. I need fresh sage for her this morrow, and have yet to find any. I will search on the short walk to our home."

"But what if you find none?"

"Impossible, milady...Kaelyn, for I always find what I seek. As I learn the secrets of the forest, as well as herbal lore taught by my grandmother, my knowledge makes me stronger each day. One day I shall study with the Elves, to learn their healing secrets, as I hope to become the best healer in all of Caelevoria!"

Suddenly there is no air, no light. The world spins, and I find myself falling. Caelevoria?! Why, that is a

story, is it not? Have I not read that word before? Blackness overwhelms me, and I know no more.

I groggily open my eyes, at first only seeing the brilliant blue sky with small clouds scuttling across it. I shift my head and see trees swaying in the breeze, but the pain hurts my head, neck, and back. "Mmphh." I groan; that fall bumped me up quite a bit. How did I manage to trip in the clearing, where the path was clear? I move a bit more, and Aaron's face comes into focus; he's crouched next to me. My movement must have caught his attention. He looks worried, so before he can say a thing, I reassure him. "I'm fine, Aaron. I just tripped and fell, don't worry." I pause, but he still looks worried. "You wouldn't believe the dream I was having! How long was I-"

As I'm talking to him, he stretches and stands up. My eyes travel from his confused expression, to his simple brown shirt and - breeches? There's no other word for them - and on to the basket of herbs on his arm. I glance down at myself and see that I'm definitely not wearing the same clothes I left my house in this morning. My shirt is white and loose,

hugged to my body by a brown corset. Underneath it all I'm wearing a plain brown skirt and sturdy slippers.

No. Way. This is not happening.

"Lady Kaelyn, are you alright?! You simply fell right in the middle of the clearing and I wasn't sure what to do. I quickly fetched a sprig of Anhelos blossoms, for their reviving powers, and that seemed to help. What is...Air-on? What do you mean?"

I must be dreaming! I pinch myself on the arm (cliché, I know) and yelp in surprise when it actually hurts. I guess dreaming is out. Hmm. This stranger with my friend's face is still looking at me like I'm going to fall apart any second. He's probably right.

"Aaron...I mean, Calder...I don't know how to explain. You aren't going to believe a thing that I tell you." How do I explain to someone that his entire reality is just a story for others' enjoyment? And, furthermore, that he's not even important enough to be mentioned! That is, if I'm not hallucinating right now (which is certainly more likely).

"Please try, miss." His look is bordering on fear at this point. I can't tell if he's afraid that I'm hurt or if he thinks I'm a psycho getting ready to attack. Maybe both.

"Um. Tell me, do you know how to read, Calder?" How can I explain books if he can't read?

"Yes, miss. My grandmother taught me herself! It is a rare skill in these parts, but essential to study the history of medicine, of course."

"Okay...Well, um...I'm not from Caelevoria. I'm from...another land." Close enough. I can't possibly tell him that he shouldn't exist...Least of all because he would never believe me (and think that I was nuts!), and most of all because if he did believe me, the truth would break his heart.

"Oh, I see, but I thought you said that you lived near Neme, and traveled there with your father?" Shit. What do I say to that?!

"That was...a...a...test. To see if I could trust you. You see, I know how to take care of myself, but I wanted to make sure you wouldn't try to hurt me. If you had

bad intentions, surely knowing that I was alone and lost would reveal your true nature, correct?"

"I...see, Kaelyn. That is very clever!" He brightens up a bit. "But why, then, did you fall a moment ago?"

Damn it! This guy is far too observant...And it creeps me out that his personality is shining out through the body of my best friend. I shudder slightly. "All part of the test! And, in fact, my real name isn't even Kaelyn. It is Sage. You've proven yourself trustworthy, so you deserve to know the truth." Wooh, that wasn't so bad, was it?

"Ah," he says, "so your name is Sage? How odd. And you speak in such an odd way because you're from a different land?" He's one to talk!

"Yes, Calder, that is correct."

"And you can defend yourself." It wasn't even a question this time. "Can you show me?" I sigh slightly. I guess those karate classes I took in freshman year might finally pay off.

"How can I show you?"

"I've never seen a maid defend herself. In our land, they are often helpless creatures." He sounds disappointed at this fact; I giggle a little at the look on his face. "I'll approach you. Please, show me what you would do if I had dishonest intentions." I agree, and he helps me to stand. The bruises hurt a little, but nothing's too terrible. I stretch a bit, and stand still.

He walks a few paces a way, sets down his basket, and turns to face me. He walks slowly towards me, looking doubtful that a "maid" such as myself could possibly do a thing to him. It's that look that makes me less hesitant about hurting him; as he gets within a foot of me, he suddenly finds himself on his back on the ground.

"Wmph. Ugh." He says intelligently. He looks like he might actually be in pain.

"I'm so sorry Calder, did I hurt you?" My voice comes out in a weird mix of concern and smugness. I hope he only hears the concern.

He jumps back on his feet. "I'm wonderful, Kae-, sorry, Sage! A lass who can take care of herself! I

never dreamed..." He looks delighted at his discovery, like I'm his fun new pet. As if.

"Well, that's great. But if you'll excuse me, I really have to be..." And it hits me.

I'm.

In.

Caelevoria.

With no way home, sure, but who cares?! I'm here! Finally!! My face breaks into a grin before I even realize, and I turn back to Aaron/Calder.

And then pause again.

I'm not sure what to think about who I "was" a moment ago. Was this Kaelyn girl a real person? Will her father never see her again? And what if I hadn't realized that it wasn't me? Would I have ever found her - my - family; did they even exist?

I decide that it's too much to think about. Yes, it was odd, but simply hearing that word - Caelevoria - that was so important to me back in my home...It broke me out of the trance somehow. Does that mean I can

break Aaron/Calder out of his trance? Or is this guy really someone different?

"Hmm. Calder...Does it mean anything to you if I say...Aaron?"

"No miss, I don't know what you mean."

"What about West Seneca High School?" He shakes his head. "No? Okay...hmm." I think about it. And then it hits me...

"Callie Benson."

I wait for Aaron to reemerge, after hearing the name that matters to him most.

"What is a Callie, miss?"

Damn. If her name can't bring Aaron out, then he's not there. I guess this Calder guy just shares the same face.

"Never mind! Just...Another test, to make sure you know nothing of the land I came from." I grin at him, and he smiles back reluctantly. "Anyway. As I said before, I'm visiting from another land. I'd love to get to know you and see more of this beautiful country!

Am I still invited to lunch, I mean, the noonday meal?"

A smile grows on his face, too, and for a moment I almost believe I have Aaron back.

Nope. "You'd get to know me, miss?" He laughs and grins an impish grin. I guess boys will be boys, no matter if they're real or products of a fairy tale. "Surely, let us go eat. Then I can show you this beautiful land."

It was only a short walk through the forest with Aar-, I mean, Calder, but it seemed to take forever with all of the thoughts swarming around my head. I can't believe I'm in Caelevoria! I still haven't gotten over the shock. The winding path finally leads us into a clearing, and I stop dead. He looks back at me inquisitively.

"What is it miss?"

"Call me Sage..." I say absently. How can I focus on words when I'm presented with this? The first thing that I see is, of course, the house. It is modest; Calder wasn't lying. But oh, it's just like a gingerbread house,

or a fairy tale cottage (I suppose it is, technically...). The sides are made of beautiful stacked stones, in every shade imaginable; soft blues, rich browns, pale pinks, steely greys, almost-whites; with cute little windows set into every side - framed by cedar shutters - and a small arched front door (also cedar) with a little glass window set in the top. The perfectly symmetrical peaked roof is covered in matching cedar shingles, and hangs low over the sides, reaching within 4 feet of the ground. A stone chimney peaks out near the back, with subtle twists of smoke floating into the sky.

My eye travels to the rest of the clearing: the curving little path that meanders around the space, the luscious grass that covers the ground, and the beautiful flower beds, both against the house and in clusters throughout the area. I can see a vegetable garden peaking out from behind the house, and some fruit trees near the edge of the clearing.

I finally turn back to Calder. "You live here?!"

He looks hesitant. "Yes, miss Sage. Is it not good? I apologize for the simplicity of our home, but we enjoy it here."

My jaw drops again. "Not good?! I love it! It's the most beautiful house I've ever seen!"

He finally smiles and says, "come, I'll show you the inside!" He grabs my hand and pulls me down the path to the door. "You must meet my grandmother!" He turns away from me and knocks on the door lightly before pushing it open and running inside. "Grandmother, I'm home! I brought company!"

I pause again to admire the beauty of this house. The inside is even more charming than the outside! The first room we enter is a living room of sorts, with comfortable looking chairs and a love seat centered around a low table. A beautiful rug covers most of the wooden floors. There are oil lanterns and candles on many of the surfaces, and a fireplace against the wall has a low fire burning.

A doorway is set in the wall to the right of us, and through it I can see a beautiful little kitchen. In the center of this room is a table set for three (are they

expecting someone else for dinner?), with a vase of wildflowers occupying the center. Everything is very clean, from the neat countertops to the bright yellow curtains hanging in the window. There are many jars and canisters that appear to hold food of sorts, and bunches of herbs hang drying near the window.

"Grandmother?" Calder speaks loudly, breaking me out of my reverie. We cross to the far side of the living room, and peer in another open door. This one leads to a quaint bedroom, obviously the grandmother's. There are too many floral patterns and pastel colors to be Calder's. Right?

"Is this your grandmother's room?"

"Yes...But she's not here. She must be out back in the garden."

We follow the back wall of the living room to the left, and find a short hallway. At the end, another small door leads back out to the clearing, and about halfway down, on the right, is another door. I try to look in as we walk past, but the door is closed. "That room that we just passed. Is that yours Calder?" I try to sound casual, but I have to admit, I'm curious.

"It is. I will show you later if you'd like to see it, miss Sage." What is with this miss business?

"Please, just call me Sage. Am I really that much of a 'miss'?"

He grins back at me. "I suppose you are right...Sage. No 'miss' can defend herself against attack." I can tell he's becoming more comfortable with me, which is good. I don't need to be treated like some pansy-ass dame from his time. I can take care of myself, and maybe if he realizes that, he'll show me what Caelevoria is really like. I don't need to be protected.

We head out the back door, and into the vegetable garden I saw from the front. It has everything! I recognize the carrots and the watermelon, the squash and the beans, but there are some plants here that I've never seen before. Either they don't grow in my hometown, or they're a Caelevoria specialty.

We walk a few more steps and come upon a petite old lady, diligently weeding. She sees us approaching and stands up to greet us. Before Calder can explain my presence, or even say hello, her face breaks into a wide smile.

"Hello, grandson," and then she turns to me with an expectant look on her face and says simply, "Good, you've arrived."

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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Chapter 4

Caelevoria - chapter 4

~Chapter 4~

I stared at her in shock for a minute before I could compose myself. Arrived?! She was expecting me!?

"Um, nice to meet you...??" Calder never actually told me her name, after all. "You were expecting me?"

"You may call me Eru. And yes, I was expecting you, Sage." It may seem pointless by now to wonder, what with all the other weird occurrences, but how did she know my name?! Calder doesn't seem overly surprised at any of this. He just looks back and forth between the two of us as if deep in thought.

Wait, that name...Eru...Eru. I've heard that before, somewhere. I remember! She was mentioned in the book! She was...the greatest healer in the land when she was younger! And then in the book, as an older woman, she saves Artemis from-

My jaw drops. Two things occur to me at the same time. The first is simple; this woman in front of me has extraordinary power, and is even able to occasionally know things before they happen. The second thought makes my heart start to race and my palms start to sweat: Artemis.

Calder interrupts my thoughts by gently touching my arm. "Sage, are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine Calder." I turn back to his grandmother. "Excuse me, ma'am," I say hesitantly, "but are you the Eru who saved the knight, Artemis, when others claimed that he was burned beyond saving? When he defeated the dragon,"

"Valdes, yes," her face clouds over for just a moment, but then it's gone and she looks normal. Did I imagine that? "I saved him. It took nearly all of my skills and knowledge, but I healed his wounds."

She doesn't sound proud or as if she's bragging, she just states her accomplishments as fact. "And," this is the part I've been dreading to ask, "how long ago was that?" If she saved him many years ago, then Artemis is an old man by now.

"Why...about 7..." Oh no oh no oh no! "Moons ago. At the beginning of spring." No way! I can't believe my luck!! That would mean that the end of the book, where Artemis defeats Bartholemy, was only about two months ago! He just turned nineteen! I have to meet him.

A few minutes later we sat down at the kitchen table to eat lunch. As we walked into the room I could smell something heavenly that I hadn't noticed from our earlier walk through the house. I couldn't figure out what it was until Eru ladled out bowls of soup from a pot over the cooking fire. Calder, meanwhile, pulled a cloth bundle out of a cupboard and unwrapped it, revealing a loaf of bread. By the time Eru had set loaded dishes in each of our places, Calder had cut the bread and laid the slices on a plate in the center of the table. He then left the kitchen and

returned with a pitcher. He poured what appeared to be water into three glasses and set them by our plates on the table. Finally we took our seats and began this amazing meal.

"Mmmm, this soup is delicious, what's in it?" I ask Eru. I hadn't realized just how hungry I was until my first spoonful of soup. It seems like ages since I last ate.

"Rabbit from the forest, as well as potato, carrot, onion, and other vegetables and herbs from the garden," she tells me. Rabbit?! Well, I guess I better get used to it if I don't want to starve while I'm here...

"I caught the rabbit myself," Calder piped up, looking very proud of himself, "but grandmother is an extraordinary gardener and cook. She keeps our vegetable and flower gardens thriving." He looks even more proud of Eru as he says this, and I can really tell that he cares about her.

"Well it is very good," I say again. They have quite a life here. It must be nice.

I take a tentative sip from my glass, and find the most delicious water I've ever tasted. There's no trace of pollutants or chemicals in it, and it's cold enough to hurt my teeth a little as I drink more. It tastes so pure and wonderful, I can't imagine any drink tasting better.

"Where did you get the water, Calder?"

"From the well." I look at him questioningly, and he explains further, "It's in the corner of the vegetable garden, hidden by the tall plants." Aha.

As I soak up the last drops of my soup with the last piece of bread crust, Eru turns to me once again. "I know, Sage, that you haven't given much thought to why you are here, but it was no accident that you arrived in the forest at the same time that my grandson was passing through."

"You know why Sage is here, grandmother?" Calder looks at her questioningly.

"It is not certain, but I know that this is meant to be."

She pauses for a moment, and I jump in. "Know that what is meant to be, exactly?!"

"Why, you being here of course," she responds, and continues, "The elves prophesized, many years ago, that the arrival of a fair maiden, with a healing name, would bring great change to our land. They believed that the events following her arrival would lead us to a Golden Age; a time of great peace!" Her face shines as she says this. She can't be talking about me!?

"Why didn't you tell me of this prophecy, grandmother?" Calder looks hurt that she didn't share this with him.

"You never asked," she states simply.

I barely even hear this exchange as I contemplate what Eru just said. "And you believe that this...maiden...is me?!" She can't be serious.

"Yes."

"But," I think about what she said, "what do you mean, 'a healing name'?"

"Your question has merit, for I myself never knew what form this name would take. But now it is clear,

for sage is a plant of great healing powers, when used correctly."

My jaw drops, for what seems like the fifteenth time today. Does this mean that they expect me to be some sort of hero?! I can't save the planet! But wait... At the end of the book, Caelevoria was already in a Golden Age, wasn't it? Artemis had just defeated the evil warlock, and the kingdom was at peace. What do they need me for?

As I struggle to organize my thoughts and voice my questions, Calder asks one of them for me. "But grandmother, what is Sage supposed to do? Do you expect her to save our kingdom single-handedly?"

Eru shakes her head as Calder speaks, "No, Calder, Sage must simply do what she believes is right. The prophecy does not state that she will rescue us, just that her coming will bring about the necessary changes. She may have some hand in our deliverance, or her presence may be enough. Only time will tell." Whew! Relief washes over me as I realize that the fate of this amazing land does not rest on my shoulders. "However," she continues, "this

prophecy may not come to pass if certain events do not occur. We do not know what must happen to fulfill the prophecy, so we must all just do our best." Damn. So I might have to save the country, but then again I might not? Hm. I'm still not sure what to think about this. This still doesn't answer my other questions, though.

"But Eru, why does the country need to be saved? I thought that Caelevoria was already in a time of peace!" They both chuckle darkly at this, and look at me like I must be out of my mind. How much could have changed since the end of the book?!

"Why would you think that, Sage?" Calder asks me, still looking at me as if I'm lost and confused.

"Why, Artemis defeated Bartholemy only two months ago, right? Isn't the kingdom recovering from his evil influences?" They continue shaking their heads as I say this, and it's starting to frustrate me. I'm not stupid! I read the book; practically memorized it for crying out loud!

"Why, Sage," Eru says sadly, "things have only worsened since then."

"Yes," Calder adds, "no one knows why, but the dragon attacks have increased, as well as thievery and violence. Fairies are acting up more than ever, and the elves have withdrawn even further into their forest homes. People of great importance to our country disappear, every day, and no one knows why. The roads are no longer safe to walk alone - or at all - and our king has stopped doing a thing about it!" His voice changes from sorrow to anger halfway through this little speech, and I can tell that he doesn't approve of the state of his home, or the king's actions in response.

"Oh." What else can I say? "Hasn't anyone done anything about this?!"

"Artemis has helped in some cases..." Calder admits. Yay! My hero! "But not often, and only on a small scale. He only goes for showy rescues, it all seems political to me." Oh. I frown a little, that can't be right. Then again, Calder does seem to be a little jealous. Probably because Artemis became famous before Calder could.

"He has done his part, Calder, as much as we can expect of him." Thank you, Eru! "He has only fought smaller battles, against minor thieves and warlocks, but those victories still aid our country." Calder nods grudgingly, and I smile - not only at Calder's expression, but also at the thought of Artemis saving people from evil.

"I know that this is a lot to take in, dear," Eru speaks to me once more. She sure has that right! I found myself in the land of my dreams only a couple short hours ago, and I'm already expected to have some hand in their salvation! "But we don't have to rush anything. You just take your time and decide what course of action you would like to follow. You may rest here as long as you like." These people are so kind to me! I hope others I meet are just as gracious.

"Thank you so much, Eru. But what then? After I've had my fill of rest and relaxation, what should I do?" They may be kind, but they have also given me far too many choices to make, and too much responsibility!

"That is up to you darling." More choices, oh boy! She continues. "You may explore the local woods, visit any city or town that you would like, or take up a quest of your own. Do what your heart tells you to do, Sage. Calder will accompany you where you wish to go, right Calder?" We both look expectantly at him, only to find him nodding and grinning like a child.

"Of course, grandmother. It would be my honor to join Sage wherever she wishes to go. Unless she'd rather go without me..." He pouts a little, and I can't believe this isn't Aaron. He acts just like him!

"No, Calder, I would like you to join me when I decide to go...somewhere." I pause for a moment. "I think, if it's alright...I'd like to start in the capital. Venari, right?" I figure this will give me the best chance of meeting Artemis. Wait, that seems pretty selfish, considering the fate of all of Caelevoria might rest on this. But wouldn't the capital be a good place to start anyway? Yes, it will be best in all aspects to start in Venari.

I didn't realize as I was contemplating this that my conflicting thoughts were showing on my face, but as

I look up, both Eru and Calder are looking at me as if waiting for me to confirm my decision. I smile sheepishly. "Yes, let's go to Venari, as soon as I've had some rest, and some more of Eru's delicious cooking, I hope." I grin at her as I say this, and she smiles back at me, looking flattered. "Can we set out tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, that can all be arranged," Eru says.

"Great!" Calder adds, "I shall go pack now!" WAIT.

"Ummmm. Wait. What about clothes?!! What will I wear on this trip? I only have what I'm wearing, and who knows how long our journey will take!"

"Nothing to fear, Sage," Eru says comfortingly, "I have it taken care of." She walks out of the room and returns with a small pack, which she hands to me. Inside of it I find more skirts, similar to the one I am wearing but in more flattering colors such as deep green and blue, as well as other blouses and tops. They all look to be more or less my size.

"But...How did you know? Wait, nevermind. I keep forgetting that you've been expecting me." She thinks of everything! And I'm so glad of it right now.

"I thought you might be needing some garments to help you blend in. I hope those suit you well."

"Thank you so much, Eru, this is all more than I could have possibly asked for! How will I ever repay you?"

"Just follow your heart. That will be enough."

I wake up suddenly and can't figure out where I am. It is pitch black around me, and loud yelling is filling the air. What is happening?! This isn't my room...

Suddenly, the whole day rushes back to me, and I remember that I'm sleeping on the floor on a straw pallet, in the living room of Calder's house.

We talked more after lunch, and then I spent the rest of the day sharing life stories with Eru and Calder, and exploring the forest around their cabin with Calder as my guide. I learned that Calder's parents died in a fire when he was a young toddler; a dragon carelessly flamed over the forest and set their house afire. Calder only survived because his parents put

his safety before their own. They wetted cloths in the nearby stream and wrapped him in them - instead of tending to their burns - saving him from the spreading fire. Eru found him later that evening in the reeds by the water, after traveling to her daughter's house because of a 'bad feeling'. It's good that they have each other; I think that Eru would be quite lonely without Calder, and he, of course, wouldn't have survived on his own in these woods as a baby. He doesn't even remember his parents, or anything before living with Eru in their home.

I also learned that Calder is a naturally talented healer, and is very gifted with herbs and medicine. I had to get this information out of Eru, as Calder was too modest to admit any of it. They, in turn, learned a lot about me, though I tried to skip over details of our technology. It seems like we're all fascinated by our different ways of life.

My memories of today run through my head quickly, and in just a moment I'm back to worrying about the current situation. I still hear loud voices, but I can't tell where they're coming from or what they're

saying. And I can't see a thing! I know that Eru left a low fire burning in the fireplace for me, to 'light my way' if I woke up in the middle of the night and needed something. Well, I'm awake, and I need to see, so what happened?!

In a few more seconds - that seem to take an eternity - the voices die down, and suddenly the room is filled with dim light again. I look to see the fire burning in the fireplace as if nothing even happened. I'm still contemplating what just happened when another, much louder voice startles me.

"GRANDMOTHER?!" I can tell that it's Calder yelling, and his tone worries me. He sounds very worried, and very scared.

"Calder?" I try to speak, but my voice gets caught in my throat. For some reason, an intense terror is sweeping over me. I clear my throat, and manage to speak with some force this time. "Calder, what's going on?" He apparently hears me, and comes running into the room, looking disheveled in only short breeches. His hair is standing all on end like he just woke up (because he just did, I'm sure), and his face

contains so much anguish that I don't even think about it before running up to him and hugging him.

"Calder, what's wrong? Where's Eru?" I ask as I pull away.

"I...I do not know, Sage. I cannot find her, and I do not know what happened." He looks panicked.

"Okay, Calder, take a deep breath." I pause until he makes a conscious effort to calm down. "We can figure this out. She's not in her room?"

"No, and I don't know-"

"Whoa, just one step at a time. Could she be in the garden, or in the woods?"

"No, I checked the garden and she would never venture into the forest without telling me first." He seems to be slowly calming down, or repressing the panic at least, and allowing himself to think rationally. He knows that he needs to be thinking well if we want to find Eru, and I'm glad he can control his worry. I don't know how composed I would be if someone I loved dearly just disappeared. I cast around for ideas on how to find her. The only

place I can think to start is her room, so I suggest going over it again, and Calder agrees.

As we look around her room in the dim light from the living room fire, nothing seems different our out of place from how it was this afternoon. Calder steps further inside the room, and a moment later a light flares from the far corner. Calder comes back toward me holding a bright lamp, and we turn back to the room to search for clues on Eru's disappearance.

"Nothing seems out of place," I murmur to myself, knowing that it's not a helpful comment at all. "Everything seems just as neat as..." I trail off and Calder turns to me with an unfathomable expression on his face.

"Sage, what is it?"

"Everything isn't as neat as it was earlier; it's neater. The bed looks too perfect, and the desk looks less cluttered. I'm sure you know this room better than I do, so tell me, is there anything missing?"

"Why..." he examines the desk carefully, and turns to me with a look of horror. "All of her personal things

are gone. Her small book on medicinal herbs, the drawing of our home that I made for her when I was young; these and more are missing from her desk. It looks lived in, but not by my grandmother. This room could belong to anyone now; it is as if she never existed!" I can understand his distress, but not his fear. I'm feeling more confusion than anything else; what does this all mean? He answers my silent question for me. "This is...exactly what has happened, to all of the others."

His sentence brings back the fear that I felt earlier. I'm almost too afraid to ask. "The...others...?" I choke out.

"The others who disappeared. My grandmother..." He's almost whispering at this point. "Eru...has been taken."

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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Chapter 5

Caelevoria - chapter 5

~Chapter 5~

I woke up in the living room again, this time to bright sunlight streaming through the windows. Last night we turned the whole house over looking for clues, or even some personal item of Eru's that "they" (whoever they are that took her) missed. And found nothing. I could see Calder getting more and more frustrated as time wore on.

Around the time that the sky started lightening, I convinced him that it was best for both of us to get some sleep. I look over now at his worried face, troubled even in sleep (last night, among his

mumbled complaints in which I distinctly heard the words 'not proper', I convinced him that it would be safer if he brought his bed into the living room as well). I know he won't rest easy again until we know that Eru is safe.

After a few moments, Calder stirs and starts to wake up. I look away quickly so he won't catch me watching him.

"Sage?" he asks softly.

"Yes, Calder?"

"I'm fearful for my grandmother." Wow. I can't believe that he trusts me enough to be this honest; after all, I just met him yesterday. Then again, who else does he have?

"We'll find her, I promise. We just have to figure out where to start. Now, I know we searched the entire house last night, but it's a new day, and we've rested. Can you think of any place else that we could find some indication of where she was taken? Or someplace that she would hide something special?

Anywhere at all?" I just can't think of anything else to do until we know where to start.

He thinks for almost a minute before his face lights up. "I am so foolish! Of course..." He gets up and swiftly walks to the front door before he even finishes talking. I follow him and he leads me outside to an old gnarled tree on the edge of the clearing. It looks ancient, but still proud and tall.

"My grandmother always called this her 'secret tree', and showed me once when I was young-" He reaches up past the first fork in the trunk and presses a knot on one of the limbs. Suddenly there's a small cavity, about the size of a fist, where he pressed, though I can't figure out how it got there. It looks empty, and I can see his face fall in disappointment. He reaches in anyway, and swipes his fingers around to make sure that there's nothing inside. Just as he's about to pull his hand away, I see him pause, and he draws out a small slip of parchment. He brings it close to his eyes to examine the small writing. "Dear Calder, " he reads, "I have foreseen them coming for me. I know that I must go with them, or they will harm you both.

I may not explain further, except to say that I will be all right. Take Sage on her journey, and remember to follow your heart. You will find the answers you seek and more. All my love, Eru."

"That's good Calder!" I talk quickly, trying to fill the silence that her note left behind. "That means that she's okay, and we can find her!" He still looks upset, so I continue. "Of course, we can't go to Venari, that doesn't make any sense anymore...Where could we find answers?"

He looks deep in thought, as if contemplating the same thing. I try to remember everything I ever read about Caelevoria, and all of the minute details the book contained. Where would someone go to find answers? Of course! We both speak at the same time.

"The elves."

We returned to the house as soon as we made our decision, and now we're preparing for our trip. We've decided to set out tomorrow morning, since it's late afternoon already. In addition to the clothes we packed yesterday, we've added dried foods - bread, raw vegetables and fruits, and some dried meat - to

our bags, as well as cooking equipment; Calder already has flint and steel to start fires. After adding two bows and some arrows (which Calder says he'll show me how to use on our trip), and a couple knives, we turn to the kitchen table where he has several maps spread out. The biggest one, stretched out across most of the tabletop, is of the entire country of Caelevoria, and even shows the neighboring country of Brevisi. It has all of the major landmarks and towns, so we lean over it to plan our trip.

"To our knowledge, all major settlements of elves are found in the Proceri Forest," Calder says, gesturing at a forest that covers a large portion of Caelevoria's eastern half. The forest borders a lake - by the name of 'Altusa', according to the map - and some mountains. "Most of their villages are concealed from us, but this one, here," he points to a small dot by the lake, "is the most-visited by humans. We must travel here, then win the elves' favor. If we succeed, they may lead us to their capital city, Dryst, somewhere in this area," he gestures to a dot in the middle of the

forest. "This is an estimate where the city is located, that Eru added to this map herself."

I look at the little speck that signifies our destination, and then let my eyes wander almost straight across the map, to our own little hand-drawn dot labeled "Home". The distance looks incredible, and I have no idea how to even begin. Good thing Calder's here. He places his index finger on our starting point.

"We will first travel to Neme," he says, dragging his finger about an inch to the right to the town's mark on the map, "to ask for news on disappearances and other misfortunes, and buy any other supplies we may need. This should take a day or so. Then we will head north to our small branch of the Volo river," he brings his finger up a bit to rest on the thin blue line, "and follow that to where it meets the main Volo. Hopefully we will accomplish this leg of our journey in three or four days." I look to where his finger rests, at the fork in the river, and see the logical conclusion to our journey.

"And from there," I take over, placing my finger next to his, "we will take a boat of some sort down the

river's other fork, directly to Altusa lake, right?" We move our fingers side by side down the little river until they both rest in the patch of blue that represents the lake.

"Correct, Sage. A man lives at this divide of the river; he will take us to Altusa lake in his small boat. The Volo is swift, so this leg of our journey should be the shortest; only a few hours. It may also be the most dangerous, however, for the river has harsh rapids, and many thieves and villains prowl the banks. We will be far safer with him, however, than if we traveled this passage alone."

"Just make sure to teach me how to shoot that bow before then, and we'll be fine." I grin at him, but he barely cracks a smile. I divert my attention back to the task at hand. "So we can reach the elfin village in under a week. How long will it take to reach their capital?"

"I do not know," he says slowly, "Eru only told me that it takes some time, but to never attempt to find the city without an elf's help, for I would get lost and

never find the way to safety. They are very protective of their home, and hide it very well."

The immensity of our task suddenly seems very daunting: this is just the first step of our journey! And Calder is already doing so much; I'll have to help however I can. "What do you have to eat in this house? Would you like me to cook us some dinner?"

He looks at me for a second, as if surprised, but still too tired and upset to show it, and says, "Yes, that would be excellent. We have all of the food in the garden, and I will also catch another rabbit."

Oh no, I can't cook an entire rabbit! I've never cooked any kind of meat that was still on the animal. I shudder a little and ask tentatively, "But...would you prepare the rabbit for me? I can cook it, I just don't know what to do with a whole rabbit."

He finally chuckles slightly as he replies, "Certainly, Sage, I will bring you just the meat to cook." I sigh in relief and realize yet again how I never could have survived here on my own.

A couple hours later we sat down to dinner. I had decided on cooking the rabbit similarly to the soup that Eru had served us, but I thickened it into a stew instead. Maybe it's because I made it myself, or because I'm in a strange land and things taste better here, but that first bite of stew was absolutely delicious. I'm on my second bowl now, and I still haven't had enough. Calder has been quiet for the whole meal, except to compliment me on my cooking when we first began. I can understand why he's so upset, but that doesn't stop me from getting exasperated with him.

"Calder, can I ask you something?" He looks up from pushing his food around.

"Yes, Sage. What is it?"

"I have just two questions, about Eru actually. She can see the future, right? That's really true?"

"Yes. While she cannot simply see whatever she wishes, she can see fragments of what is to come."

"Okay, and more importantly: Would she ever lie to you?"

He looks puzzled at this for half a moment, as if wondering why I'm even bothering to ask this. "Certainly not! She would never tell me anything less than the truth. She's assured me of that for as long as I can remember."

"Exactly." I smile at him, though he still looks confused.

"I beg your pardon? Exactly what?"

"She can see the future, she always tells you the truth, and she specifically told you in her letter that she would be all right. So why are you worried?"

He opens his mouth to answer, and then closes it again. Finally he says quietly, "I know, yet I still am. While she may be all right, that does not mean that she will not get hurt. She may mean 'all right' as reassurance that she will not..." He pauses, "die. Still, that does not tell us what state she will be in when we-"

"Calder, we can't think like that! We have to trust that she'll be okay, and we can't let ourselves get distracted by our worries. We will have a much

easier time of saving her if you just trust her. She told you she'd be okay, so believe her, and focus on our journey instead of her safety. That is all we can do to help her."

"You're right Sage; I will try to trust her. I know that this will be the best way to accomplish our goal."

After that, it was as if Calder was a totally different person; or at least back to his normal self. I could still see that his smile didn't always reach his eyes, but he relaxed a lot and was more friendly and focused on our trip at the same time.

After dinner we finished packing, and now I'm lying awake on my mattress in the living room. I've been tossing and turning for a long time now; Calder seemed to have the same problem at first, but eventually his breathing slowed and became regular. Now that he's asleep, I can't help but be nervous about the journey ahead of us. The most adventure I've ever had was camping in a tent for a night or two with family! I don't know how to survive in the wild, especially not in a foreign world. I'll make a point of learning everything I can from Calder; I want to do

as much as I can to help search for Eru, and to fix whatever mess the kingdom is in, so I'll have to be strong. I can already defend myself hand to hand, but what about against a weapon, or magic of some sort? I must learn quickly.

I wake up in the morning without even remembering falling asleep. My mind is still running on overdrive, planning and deciding how I can make myself stronger for the trials we have ahead. I guess I should start now.

Even though Calder is still asleep (and I would like nothing more than to roll over and close my eyes again), I gently slip off the mattress and stand up. I tiptoe past Calder's bed and out the back door. Hmm, fresh fruit would be good for breakfast. I survey the fruit trees, and decide on apples. I pick us two apiece, and pluck some herbs on the way back into the house.

"Mmmm, what is that delicious smell?" Calder asks me a few minutes later as he walks into the kitchen, rustling his hair and rubbing his eyes.

"I baked us each an apple over the fire, and saved us each one to each fresh." I hand him his fresh apple as I say this, and he bites into it right away.

"You realize that you've made a grave mistake, Sage, in cooking like this today and yesterday evening." Uh oh. What did I do wrong?

"Is there something wrong with the apples?! Or was it the herbs I chose? What did I do?"

He laughs quietly before answering me. "Why, nothing is wrong! I simply meant that now I will insist that you cook the meals for the entirety of our journey. My cooking simply does not compare." His face breaks into a wide grin as he says this, the happiest I've seen since Eru went missing.

I laugh right along with him as he says this. It still surprises me at times how similar he is to Aaron, though I'm sure Aaron would've found a way to hide the compliment a bit better. "Thank you Calder. I would love to cook on our journey. I want to do everything I can to help." I grab a large spoon from a drawer and scoop the apples out of the pan that's suspended over the fire. Yet again I find that the food

here seems to taste better than anything I've ever had in my entire life. It's as if it seems more real, more filling somehow; ironic if you think about it.

"Mmm," Calder smiles at me again, "I see I did indeed make the proper decision on cooking responsibilities."

"As long as you do the hunting and prepare the meat for me, it's a deal. But not for the entire trip, of course. I want to learn how!"

He looks very surprised by this request, but then smiles at me. "Of course Sage, how else would you practice as I teach you how to use the bow and arrow?"

As soon as we finish eating, we clean up and check our packs one last time. Satisfied with our tools and supplies, we sling our bags on and take one last walk around the house. As Calder says goodbye to each room, I finally get to see the inside of his. With the mattress from the living room newly replaced on his bed, his room looks quite cozy and neat. Other than the bed, the only other furniture is a small desk and chair, a wardrobe, and a couple shelves. Little things

around the room, such as books on medicine and a small collection of polished stones, seem to make the space entirely his. I can suddenly see why it would be so disturbing to him to have all traces of his grandmother disappear. I remain quiet despite any questions that pop into my mind, since I can tell that this is difficult for him. He's abandoning his home and everything he knows, and only because he's already lost the most important person in his life.

"I'm ready," he says to me quietly, so we turn from the door, pulling it shut behind us. We walk through the living room and to the door where I first came in, where I was first introduced to his peaceful, beautiful life. I understand that these words don't apply anymore; that it's our mission to restore them to this place. I suddenly realize that I am completely ready for this journey, and everything it may bring. I seem to see similar thoughts cross Calder's face, and we look into each other's eyes one last time before turning forward. We've accepted the past, and now we will follow our hearts.

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Map of Caelevoria:

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This may seem like an ending, but it's not. Just a tidy, non-cliffhanger chapter for once haha. :)

Thanks so much for reading! Let me know what you think. :)

Chapter 6

Caelevoria - chapter 6

~Chapter 6~

The question, "Where areee we?" forms on my lips for what seems like the hundredth time today, but I choke it back yet again. I must not whine. I have to keep reminding myself to be strong, for Calder and for Caelevoria, no matter how many times the tree limbs scratch my face and arms, no matter how much my feet hurt, no matter how dry my throat is, no matter how heavy my pack of clothing and supplies seems to become...It's hard, but I can handle it. I've been following Calder through the forest for hours, and we still haven't seen any sign of civilization. The only signs of life in these endless

trees are the occasional birdsongs and the sporadic rustling sounds of creatures moving in the underbrush.

"Calder," I say, as I finally think of a question that I can ask without feeling guilty, "how do you know where we're going? I can barely see a trail, yet since we set out this morning you've been walking as confidently as if you were following a road." I must admit that some admiration creeps into my voice as I say this; I envy a lot of the skills that Calder takes for granted.

"I've lived in these woods since I was a young boy, Sage," he replies modestly, "you only have to know what to look for." And with these words, he begins teaching me how to find a trail, which takes my mind away from the pain and monotony of our journey. "See," he says, "the broken twigs along the bushes here show where animals have traveled in the past. The greener twigs show recent breaks," he gestures to a small broken branch that still looks very much alive, "while the dead ones show older trails." With this, he points to a fractured stem with only a couple

wilted brown leaves still clinging to the end. "Well used trails will have breaks of many ages, as animals follow these paths often. I am following one of the most frequented trails in this section of the forest. It will take us out very near to Neme."

Oh. When he explains it like that it seems almost easy! I suppose a lot of the challenge is finding these clues, although I know many signs in nature will be harder to interpret than the broken twigs. "Thanks, Calder! I really appreciate you teaching me these things. I want to learn as much as possible, so I can help you as we travel on." He beams at this, and we continue on our way.

He continues pointing out small clues here and there: tracks from one animal, droppings from another, edible and poisonous plants, and other essential things to know when traveling through this forest.

After a while we lapse back into comfortable silence, only occasionally mentioning something worth noticing on the side of the trail. As I return to focusing simply on putting one foot in front of the other, I hear a slight commotion in the bushes near

me. It's louder than most of the noises that I've heard so far, so I freeze in my tracks. Calder doesn't notice, and keeps walking ahead of me, and I'm too scared to call out to him. Suddenly a small shape emerges on the path next to me, and my fears melt away.

It's the cutest little animal I think I've ever seen! It looks sort of like a rabbit, but maybe twice as big, and its torso is longer and its ears are small and round. Almost as if one of it's ancestors was a mink. "Aw, aren't you just the cutest little thing!" I say to it quietly.

At this, Calder turns around quickly and pauses only long enough to take in the sight of me reaching out to the small creature before yelling out, "No, Sage, stop!"

But my brain doesn't register his call before my hand is petting the soft fur behind the little animal's ears, and I flinch back slightly, expecting tooth and claw to come at me. But nothing happens, except for the little guy emitting a small mew of content as I continue scratching his head.

"Aww, but Calder, he's perfectly harmless! I just want to pet him and love him! Can we keep him?" I look at his face again, expecting him to realize his mistake, but he still looks frightened. Except now he keeps glancing around us as well, peering into the dense forest. He hurries over to me, grabs my arm roughly, and pulls me away from my new friend. "Calder," I protest, "Ow! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Sage, you don't understand. We have to leave him alone, now. We must hurry. Don't you have Arae where you come from?" He continues to drag me down the path as he says all this.

"Arr...ay? What?" I trust Calder enough by now to know to follow him, so I match my pace with his, even though I don't yet know why we're running from a little bunny-creature. He finally lets go of my arm.

"Arae...That was an Ara cub, did you not realize?"

Ara...Ara...That sounds so familiar! Suddenly I remember reading about those creatures in the book form of Caelevoria, and I'm sure that my face now

mirrors Calder's, both showing one emotion: fear. I have no trouble keeping up with him anymore.

"So you know the Arae? What they're capable of?" He looks relieved that I've started taking the situation seriously, but worry still dominates the emotions crossing his face. I nod curtly to his question, and he continues. "Good. So you know that if we hurry we might avoid a serious conflict."

As he says this, a crash echoes through the trees behind us, and we both jump in alarm. Without a word to one another we take off running through the woods. He reaches back for me again and grabs my hand, this time to make sure we don't get separated. I can hear more crashing behind us, as if a large creature was pursuing us through the trees. And indeed it is, for the Arae are very protective of their young. I remember reading in chapter six or seven about one encounter that Artemis had with an Ara. It was a massive beast, as tall at the shoulders as the knight himself, and only vaguely resembled the cute little animal I was petting. Tusks as long as Artemis' forearm, six-inch claws, and an insatiable urge to

eradicate anything that messes with its young: these are the things that made the Ara a formidable foe for Artemis. And that was a runt. These memories run through my mind almost as quickly as our pounding feet, and I shudder as I think of what will happen if the crashing behind us gets much closer. I do remember that the Arae rely mostly on smell, and have very weak eyesight. They may not be the smartest creatures in the forest, but they have been called the most stubborn.

"It is too close Sage!" Calder pants as we run along. "We must find a tree to climb, or it will overtake us." He stops speaking for a second to focus on breathing. I glance back and see a flash of brown through the trees. My heart - and feet - race even faster. "We must hope it does not follow our scent, or it will wait underneath us, hoping for one of us to slip. If that happens, we may be stuck in the tree for days!" Shit! We have to do something...Wait!

"Calder, I have a plan!" I huff as I try to unbutton this stupid corset as I run. I stumble, and in that instant I know that I'm falling, and won't have time to get up

before the creature overtakes me. But Calder catches my arm just in time, and steadies me as we continue running.

"Be careful, Sage!" He gasps, as I finish pulling the garment off and out from under my back pack, and bundle it in my hands.

I can't spare any air for thanks, only, "tell me...you find...good tree!"

In a moment we break into a tiny clearing and he says, "up ahead!" As we push even harder for the final sprint to our savior, a large pine tree directly ahead of us, I throw my cloth bundle as hard as I can to the left, hoping it will be enough to distract the beast behind us. I turn as we reach the trunk and scramble to find hand- and footholds, and see the Ara emerge into the small open space right as we reach the first limbs. It's scarier than I had ever imagined, even though I only get a brief impression of hugeness and ferocity as we scramble up the trunk. It pauses where I threw my corset, but then turns back toward our tree. We've climbed as high as we can manage, and are peering out at the creature. I think I hear

Calder mutter a curse as it turns our way, but it seems to change its mind and turns away from us once again. It pushes back into the growth, and we see its massive form blundering around for a while before the green envelops it yet again. We hear breaking tree limbs for a long time after, but eventually even those sounds fade. Finally, after almost an hour of cramped crouching on branches, Calder nods to me and straightens up. I follow suit and we stretch out our sore limbs before slowly returning to the ground.

We look at each other in silence for almost a minute, listening for any sounds of another attack, before I practically fall into his arms and hug him as if my life depended on it. I'm still shaking from the fright, and he quietly whispers to me, "Shhh, sh, it's alright Sage. We're alright." I pull away after a minute and smile, shivering slightly. It's late afternoon by now, and it's starting to get chilly. Although maybe that has something to do with my missing bodice...

"Sorry, I'm just a bit shaken up." He smiles back at me, and I continue, "At one point I didn't think we would make it."

"Nor did I, Sage." He glances behind me, and a grin breaks out on his face. "But we did, and I have good news."

I turn around, but see nothing special in the trees where he looks. "What is it?" He takes my hand again, and pulls me slowly through the trees. After a few paces, I see more light up ahead, and a thinning of the trees. After only a couple of minutes, we come to the end of the trees all together, and I see a sleepy little village laid out before me. "It's beautiful!" I gasp in delight.

He smiles and says simply, "Neme."

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Map of Caelevoria:

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Chapter 7

Caelevoria - chapter 7

~Chapter 7~

My first impression is of warmth. As the chilly evening breeze blows around me, the yellow glow of the lights in the town looks so welcoming I can hardly stand still. I see many cottages, similar to Calder's home in the forest, but I can also make out a few bigger stone buildings toward the center of town; taverns and inns, a town hall and church maybe? I notice that all of the light comes from streetlights - nothing more than hanging lanterns - and candlesticks in the windows. Of course they have no electricity, but I always thought of it as a hassle rather than a thing of beauty. The soft glow doesn't

disrupt nature like towns at home do, rather, Neme's light has made a small pocket of humanity; a little home for itself in the big dark world. The beauty is breathtaking.

"Let's go!" I say to Calder, excited as a small child. I grab his wrist and start pulling him toward the nearest house.

"Slow down Sage, we can't break into someone's home! We must go to an inn." I come to a stop and drop his arm. That's something I never thought of. How can we afford to stay somewhere?

"Calder, do we have money for an inn?" I look at him questioningly, but he doesn't look worried by my question.

"Indeed," he says as he pats a small pouch hanging from his belt. I assumed it was some sort of herb or something, but it jangles as he shakes it. Now I remember reading about the gold coins that Caelevorians use as currency, auries, I believe they're called. "Many people gave my grandmother gifts when she helped them; food, supplies, and occasionally money. We rarely had use for it as we

had everything we needed. She collected quite a sum of auries over the years. Other than this pouch," he shakes the small bag again, "We also have a store of them in each of our packs." Oh. I guess that explains the slight jingle I've heard from time to time since we left Calder's house; I had just thought that I was going insane.

"Okay then, on to an inn!" I change course slightly and start dragging him along again, this time toward a big square in the middle of the village. He laughs at my childish behavior, but follows willingly enough. As we sidle up between two houses and finally start walking on a road comprised of large cobblestones, he slows his steps.

"Sage, please allow me to speak with the innkeeper when we arrive. I know things are quite different in your land..."

"Yes, of course. I'd expect you to speak anyway, since you're paying and everything...And I have no clue how things are done around here." I don't think I'd want to be in charge in this case. I'd assume to just ask for a room, but what if there's some custom I

don't know about? I wouldn't want to offend anyone or get us kicked out...

"Indeed. Erm," Calder says, interrupting my thoughts. He clears his throat - nervously? - before continuing. "Is...a single room...acceptable? For safety, of course..." He blushes furiously as he says this, and I choke out a small giggle before turning it into a cough. I don't want to embarrass the poor guy, but his innocence is pretty amusing. The need to be proper - chivalrous - is one of the main things that remind me of how very different this world is from my own. It also accentuates the fact that Calder only looks like Aaron.

"I don't know, Calder...How do I know that...um...your intentions are...pure?" I try to remain serious, but it only takes one look at his horrified face for me to break into laughter. He looks confused at first, but after a few seconds a look of comprehension crosses his face.

"That was...a joke, Sage?" he asks tentatively.

"Yes, Calder, just a joke." Relief washes across his features as I continue. "A single room will be fine.

And I will feel much safer not having a room to myself. As long as I don't have to sleep on the floor, that is." I grin at him as I add the last part.

I've barely noticed the passing houses, so I'm quite surprised when I realize that we've already arrived in the central square of the town. We're currently standing at a corner of the large stone area, and I can see various other roads connecting here, as well as some sort of monument in the center. The entire opposite side of the square is occupied by a large, imposing building. I gesture in its direction and ask Calder, "What is that?"

"That is the town hall and jail." Oh, that makes sense.

"Ah, and what about those..."As I say this, I point to a few nasty looking buildings to our right. Each of them is in some state of disrepair - rotten shutters, sagging doors, broken windows, and dim lighting - and each has a wooden sign hanging over the door. At first I can't see them clearly, but a gust of wind tilts one my way and I see a roughly carved tankard of beer - accompanied by a bleeding heart with a

protruding dagger. Ick. "Taverns?" I finish, questioningly.

"Yes, Sage. You'd be wise not to venture into any of them. And next to us," he raises his hand toward the building directly to our right, on the same side of the square as us. It's taller than many of the other buildings around, and I see large stained-glass windows and a cross at the peak of its roof. Hmmm, that looks familiar.

"A church, right? They're the same where I come from...More or less."

"Yes. And the left side of the square holds various shops, as well as the inn we will be staying in, The Badger's Den." He says all of this in a slight rush, as if trying to prevent me from interrupting him again. Ha.

"The Badger's Den? That's an interesting name! It sounds...Cozy."

He gives me a questioning look before replying, "The name is indeed fitting. It is quite welcoming, yet one would be foolish to trifle with the innkeeper, Madam

Golding. She is a kind woman, but quick to snap at insolent boarders." He smiles as he says this, and I suspect that there's a story behind it.

I'm about to ask Calder more about Madam Golding when my eyes are drawn back to the statue in the center of the square. I don't know why it didn't capture my attention before, but I suddenly realize that it is of a man raising a sword. He has a proud stance: his right hand rests confidently on his hip - he must be left-handed - with one foot set slightly in front of the other as though ready to lead an army to victory. His demeanor and attitude seem familiar to me, and suddenly I discern just who I'm looking at. I stare at the statue, and don't even realize as I take a slow step in its direction. As I start walking faster, I hear Calder say something to me, but I'm too enthralled to comprehend or care. The time it takes me to cross the square seems like a lifetime, but I know it is only a few moments before I've closed the distance to a few feet, and simply stare in awe.

Artemis.

More gorgeous than I ever imagined him, even if the sculptor was exaggerating his beauty. I can't keep my jaw from dropping at his chiseled features, no pun intended, until I realize that I'm practically drooling over a stature. Yeesh, I need to get a grip. I shake my head a little, and notice a small plaque at the sculpture's feet.

Commemorating the defeat

Of the wretched dragon, Valdes

Slain on these very grounds

By the noble knight, Artemis

I slowly mouth the words to myself in awe, then practically leap in the air as a hand suddenly grabs my upper arm.

"Jeez!" I yell as I twist out of the grasp and see Calder standing next to me. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"I did not 'sneak'. I was calling you the entire time you ran over here." He looks down at me sternly and adds, "It is not safe for you here at night, alone. Not even in such a small town as Neme."

"What do you mean by not safe for me? What about you?" My question comes out rougher than I intended, partially because of my embarrassment over my attraction to the statue.

"I simply mean, that as a woman, you-"

"Excuse me?!" I cut him off before he can even finish the sentence. "As a woman!? Have you forgotten that I can defend myself, Calder? I don't need you to protect me!" I can feel my face flushing in anger as I say this. How dare he treat me like some kind of baby! As a woman indeed! I know that his society treats women as helpless creatures, but I thought he understood that I refuse to play that role. I angrily turn away from him, though I'm not sure where to go. Before I can take two steps, however, he grasps my arm again and turns me back toward him. I restrain myself from slapping him across the face, but barely. "Let. Me. Go." I growl slowly.

"Sage," he says in a pleading voice, "please listen to me." His eyes beg me to calm down, so I stand still for a moment to hear him out. He lets me go before continuing quietly but intensely, "I know you are

strong, and I know that you are not docile like most of the women of this land. But others - those who would harm you - see a mere woman, one they could easily overcome. As I intended to say before, as a woman, you will be seen as prey. Could you fight off a man twice your size, and also trained to fight? Or two or more men at once? I certainly could not. I am only safer than you because many would not fight another man, though they would be quick to take advantage of a woman."

Oh.

Well, I guess I was stupid for jumping to conclusions. I still have a lot to learn about Calder, but I should have more faith in him. He hasn't led me wrong yet. I smile apologetically, and he returns the motion tentatively. I may be quick to anger, but I am also quick to admit when I'm wrong.

"I'm sorry, Calder. You're absolutely right. It's safer to stay together. Let's go to that inn...The Badger's Den, right?"

A genuine smile lightens his face as he says, "Yes, correct. And I am truly glad you are no longer angry

with me." The smile becomes a smirk, however, as he continues. "I was worried for a moment that you would refuse to leave this statue...I've heard tell of the affect that the knight, Artemis, has on women, but I've never heard of one swooning over his statue before." I feel my cheeks burning red as he says this, and scramble to explain myself.

"Very funny, Calder...I did not 'swoon'. I have simply never seen Artemis in person, and was very interested in what he looks like!" That seems plausible, right?

He smiles knowingly and readjusts the pack on his back as he turns back toward the inn. "Indeed." Ugh! Oh well, let him think what he wants!

I twitch my own pack slightly to relieve its bite into my shoulders, and follow him back across the square. We reach the line of buildings and he steps confidently toward an inviting structure in the middle of the row. It has three stories with many glowing windows; only a few black squares are scattered across the façade. The entire first floor is lit up, and I can hear a hum of voices and occasional

laughter as we approach. A wooden sign above the door depicts a badger peering out of its burrow, with the name of the inn carved in bold script along the top of the sign. It certainly seems friendlier than the taverns across the way. As Calder pulls open the thick wooden door, a blast of warm air, delicious aromas, and merry cacophony greet us. The scent of baking bread and roasting meats causes my stomach to growl loudly, but I can barely hear it over the noise of the patrons. We step inside, and my senses are bombarded further.

A quick glance around the room reveals a crowded bar - cluttered but clean - at the back of the room, and many wooden tables occupied by three or four men. Two or three larger groups have multiple tables pushed together, and these seem to be the loudest: always laughing, sporadically cheering, and occasionally bursting into song. Everyone has a drink, and many have food as well. I count only three women sitting at tables, each accompanied by only one man, but notice a few barmaids serving food and pouring drinks. Other than the exterior wall we stand by, which is stone of course, the walls are all

made of a rich dark wood, broken up by paintings, candle sconces, and a single huge fireplace on the wall to our right. Some kind of animal - pig perhaps? - is roasting over the fire, creating the delicious smoky smell that fills the room. Calder, on my right, looks quite content. Just to our left, an open doorway reveals a dimly-lit staircase leading to the upper floors.

I take a step toward the stairs to look further, only to jump back in surprise as a rotund woman steps out of the dark. She has a mass of brown curls piled on her head, and neat but worn clothes in a similar style to my own. She smiles warmly at me and says, "May I help you, miss?" As I start to reply, her eyes move past me and land on Calder, and her smile widens even further, creasing her rosy cheeks. "Why, if it isn't young Calder! You must have grown three feet since I saw you last! And how is your grandmother?"

I see the pain cross his eyes briefly as she says this, but he quickly masks it with a broad smile. "Three feet? Why, I saw you last summer, Madam Golding!

As for my grandmother, she is suffering from aching joints, but otherwise she is well."

The innkeeper pauses shortly before replying, "I'm sorry to hear that. What may I assist you with this fine evening?" She looks at me again and adds, "my apologies miss. Calder, you must introduce me to your lovely companion!" I blush slightly at the last part, but smile at her kindness.

"Of course! Madam Golding, this is my great friend Sage. Sage; the lovely Madam Golding."

"It's nice to meet you ma'am," I say quickly.

"A pleasure, miss. Any friend of Calder's is indeed a friend of mine."

Calder adds, "We need a room for tonight, if you have one available."

She winks and says to him, "For you, sir? Always! Follow me." She starts up the stairway, and we follow quickly. The walls are paneled in the same wood as the main floor, but with many more portraits, sketches, and paintings. A small lantern hangs at the base of the stairs, and another at each landing. As we

reach the first floor, she turns to us again and asks, "One bed or two?"

"Two, please," Calder and I say quickly together. Madam laughs quietly at us before following the steps to the top level. We reach the landing and turn to the right down a short hallway lined with doors. She takes us to the last one on the right and opens the door.

"Will this suffice?"

I peer over her shoulder at a cozy little room paneled in a lighter wood than that I've seen everywhere else. A bed rests in each of the far corners, one with a gorgeous deep blue quilt, and one in matching chocolaty brown. Each has a small nightstand to one side and a large wooden trunk at the foot. Two oil lamps, one on each nightstand, illuminate the room with their warm glow. A window is set into the wall directly between the beds, with cream-colored curtains and a small potted flower on the sill. A large blue and brown round rug lies in the center of the floor, unifying the two sides of the room.

"It's beautiful!" I exclaim.

"Yes, it suits our needs perfectly," Calder says with a smile.

She leads us further into the room, and closes the door behind us. She turns to Calder and asks, "Now please, what is truly wrong with Eru? I know better than to believe that she would be bothered by mere joint aches."

"Ah," Calder replies slowly, "I thought you might. We did not wish to be overheard by strangers. It is safe to speak here?" With a nod from our hostess, he continues. "She has been taken."

I see Madam Golding's eyes widen in comprehension and fear. "My greatest apologies. Do you travel in search?" He nods. "I offer you both the greatest of luck," she adds with a small smile. "Is there some way I may assist?"

"A place to stay tonight is invaluable, I assure you," Calder says sincerely.

"Thank you Madam, we truly appreciate it," I add.

"If you are certain..."

After a small pause, she steps back to the door and opens it once again. "The washroom is just across the hall from you, here." She continues as if nothing had interrupted our tour, gesturing to the half-open door facing us. I can see a large copper tub accompanied by some kind of metal tank with a faucet. "The water is heated by coals underneath the tank, so I guarantee your bath will be hot. Simply pull the rope in the corner when you are finished, and the used water will be taken care of by one of the maids." We nod, and she continues, "Will you only be staying for one night?"

"Most likely," Calder says, "As time is of the essence. However, we hope to find information in town, and do not know how long it shall take. We must have time to travel before dusk, certainly. If we are delayed, it would only be for one more night."

"You may stay for as long as you wish, of course. It will be 27 auries per night."

"Madam Golding," Calder protests, "Why, that must be half of your usual fee!"

"For you, dear Calder, I could not possibly charge more. I would let you stay free of charge, but I could not afford to do so in these times, with business dragging. Consider it a favor to Eru, for her aid to me over the years."

I can see that Calder wasn't exaggerating earlier tonight when he described Madam Golding to me. She seems so...motherly, and caring. I smile up at her as she leaves the room and bids us goodnight.

"Hey Calder," I say as she closes the door, "If the people we meet on the rest of our journey are even half as nice as Madam Golding...I think we'll do alright."

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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Sorry it took forever and a day to upload! I had to overcome some serious writer's block for this one....It

still seems like a bit of a 'filler' chapter to me, but not every step in a journey can be epic haha.

Please feel free to offer constructive criticism and whatnot :)

Thanks~

Chapter 8

Caelevoria - chapter 8

~Chapter 8~

"Ooh, ow. Ahh. Owww." Slight sounds escape my lips as I slowly lower myself into the scalding water. Ooh yeah, this is nice.

I wandered into the washroom shortly after Madam Golding left us, just intending to look around. It's a rather small room, with a white tiled floor and creamy walls. Aside from the tub, the room also contains a small chamber pot in the far right corner, mirrored by shelves full of towels on the left. Next to these are a pitcher and washbasin on a small table, partnered with a plain rectangular mirror on the

wall. The rope Madam Golding mentioned hangs right next to the mirror's reflective surface. By the tub, a small stand holds three or four different bars of soap. By the time I saw all of this, I simply couldn't resist. I turned around and shut the door, luckily finding a simple latch to lock it with. I examined the tub for a few seconds before dropping a bar of soap into the bottom and turning the faucet on full blast. As it filled with subtle but sweet smelling foamy water, I grabbed a soft white towel and a washcloth from the shelves, laying them on the rack with the soap, quickly stripped off all my clothes, and turned off the faucet as the water filled the tub a little over halfway.

As I sink into the water, I can feel the dirt melting off me. "Mmmm," I say intelligently, but I really can't blame myself. I haven't had a proper bath since I've gotten here. Of course Eru gave me a small basin of hot water and a cloth to 'freshen up' with while I was at her house, but nothing compares to a hot, soapy, steamy bubble bath. Greater than anything, however, is the chance to relax. I haven't had any time to myself since...well, since I knocked on Aaron's door

and insisted on exploring the woods without Callie. I think back to that morning, not even three days ago. It seems so much longer.

My mind starts wandering to the journey ahead of us, and our future meeting with the elves. Not only will they (hopefully) help us find Eru, but also I just really want to meet them. From what the book said, elves have great power here, and great knowledge. They're a peaceful race, but don't hesitate to defend themselves if necessary. I remember reading that they have great healing powers, many weapons, and even magic. Not like potions and spells magic, but gifts that they've gained from their close bond with nature. They might just be the key to saving Eru and Caelevoria. And yes, I do think that these two things are connected; I don't believe in coincidences. This means, though, that the success of our quest to save Eru may determine the fate of this world.

I sink a little lower in the water and sigh. That's a lot of pressure for one girl to handle, even with the help of a guy like Calder. On top of that, I have absolutely no idea what will happen after we find the elves. Will

they even help us? And where will we go from there? Hmm. I try to shove those questions - and the countless others that pop up - to the back of my mind. There's no way to know what the next step in our journey will be, not until we reach the elves. Therefore, there's no point in worrying about it. So why can't I pull my mind away from the gaping unknown that looms in my future?

Ugh. I take a deep breath and plunge under the water, settling myself on the bottom of the tub. I slowly purge the air from my lungs, just concentrating on the breath escaping my lips, until my lungs burn and my chest aches for oxygen. I return to the surface and slowly inhale, then repeat the whole process. After three or four times of this, I've finally relaxed again. I'll just focus on the present until the future is more definite. Otherwise I'd simply drive myself insane. And presently, the most important item on my agenda is finishing this bath.

I tilt my head back into the water and start massaging my hair. It's not quite Herbal Essences, but this soap is actually doing a decent job of cleaning

my soiled locks. I'd been ignoring my hair, since there was nothing I could do about it, but the grease and grime was starting to really bother me. I run my fingers through it a few more times, and then sit up again, reaching for the washcloth and fishing around for the bar of soap. I lather up the washcloth and then ardently scrub myself all over. Be gone, dirt!

By the time I've finished cleaning up, the clouds of bubbles that I started with have disappeared, with only a couple patches of stray suds remaining on the surface of the water. I turn on the faucet one last time and rinse my hair under the hot water. I slowly stand up and turn the faucet closed before reaching for my towel and stepping out of the tub. After drying myself off quickly, I wrap the towel tightly around myself. I reach down for my clothes, leaving small puddles on the floor where my hair drips. Halfway to the door I realize that I'm supposed to pull the rope for the maid to come empty the water. I dart over, give the cord a good tug, and return to the door. A quick flip of the latch, a glance to make sure the coast is clear, and I dash across the hall and into our room, closing the door behind me.

"Erm...Hi Calder," I say as I notice his surprised look. He's sitting on the brown bed with his back against the wall and our maps spread out across the bedspread. The map he's currently examining springs out of his grasp, unnoticed apparently, and curls back into a cylinder. His eyes snap back down and he blushes furiously.

"Sage...I apologize...I did not realize..." I stare at him, confused for a moment, before glancing down at my towel. I'm well covered, but I doubt that he's ever seen a woman in anything else than long skirts before. Oops.

"Um. You don't have anything to be sorry for! I forgot to even tell you that I would be taking a bath. Just...Could I have the room for a minute so I can get dressed? Sorry."

"Yes, yes of course," he mumbles quickly as he gets up from the bed. He glances at me quickly, then steps around me and scurries out of the room. I stand in shock for a minute, then laugh quietly to myself. Poor kid, he's certainly not like teenage guys from back

home. Which adds to his trustworthiness in some ways, I guess. Mostly it's just funny.

I walk over to the blue quilted bed and squat down, reaching for my pack. I stored it under the bed just before leaving the room earlier. I dig through it for the appropriate undergarments and something comfortable to wear around the inn tonight; we still have to return downstairs to eat dinner. I pull on a deep blue skirt and slide a pale yellow shirt over my head. As I stand, the skirt reaches my ankles, as usual. The body of the shirt tightly grips my chest and flares to the waste, while the soft, wide sleeves feel nice against my newly cleaned arms. I grab my towel and rub my hair dry for a few moments before flipping it back into place. I'm sick of leaving it down, but I don't have anything to put it up with. Unless...

I reach back into my bag and pull everything out, piling all of it into the trunk that lies at the foot of my bed; clothes on one side, supplies on the other. When I reach the bottom of the pack, I find a large lumpy pouch that Eru must have stored with my clothes. I

empty the contents onto my bed, revealing a large comb and various colored ribbons. Jackpot!

I comb all the knots and tangles out of my hair and then split it into two sections. I swiftly french braid each side, and tie the bottoms with matching sky blue ribbons. Much better; it won't get in the way now. After stowing my hair care items in the trunk with everything else, I lay my pack across the top of everything and shut the lid. Kicking my dirty clothes into a lump next to the trunk, I hang my towel over a bedpost and walk over to the door.

"Calder?" I say quietly as I lean into the hallway. At first I don't see him, but then he walks over from down the hallway. "I'm decent now, sorry about making you see that."

He smiles, blushing slightly, and says, "I did not mind seeing you Sage." He pauses, and now I'm blushing. Hmm, I guess he's not so different from the boys I know. He continues by saying, "Your land's customs must be very different from ours, though. Here, a woman never shows herself less than fully clothed,

except to her betrothed." Whoops, the book never mentioned that. Oh well.

I laugh slightly and say, "Yes Calder, my land is quite different...I'll make sure to warn you next time. Can we get food though? I'm starving!" My stomach rumbles slightly as I say this, as if agreeing with me.

"Why of course!" He smiles broadly. "I thought to suggest that while waiting for you to dress." As we leave the room, he pulls the door shut and reaches into his pocket, revealing a key.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask him as he locks the door.

"Madam Golding gave it to me just before she left. I'm surprised you did not notice."

"Oh," I smartly reply. He turns and leads me down the hall and back down the stairs. We emerge into the noise and heat of the crowded main room, and pause at the bottom of the stairs. It seems even fuller than before, though people seem to be slightly quieter. He walks to the bar where Madam Golding is

wiping down the counter, and she smiles as she sees us approach.

"You would like some nice hot food, correct?" She asks knowingly.

"Yes ma'am," I say quickly, causing her to smile wider.

Calder adds, "No ale, please. We'll have milk to drink." Good idea, we definitely need clear heads on this journey.

"Of course," she replies. "Find a table and I'll bring something right over."

We wander toward the front of the room and find a table for two toward the corner, right next to a window. Calder politely pulls out a chair and gestures for me to sit. Just as we've both taken our seats, Madam Golding walks up to our table carrying two large plates and a basket, followed by a petite woman holding two large mugs of milk. As they set everything on the table, my mouth starts to water at the plates full of sliced pork, gravy, and cooked vegetables. Then I notice the basket, and just about

faint with delight at the pile of slices of soft white bread with thin flaky crust.

"Thank you!" Calder and I say in unison, and I notice that he looks just as hungry as I am as he stares at the food before us. Madam Golding and the barmaid chuckle and move on to other tasks.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, just savoring the delicious tender meat and hot vegetables. Every sip of cold milk is like pure heaven, and I have to refrain from sighing in pleasure with each bite of fluffy bread. Seriously, I'm not sure if it's the food or me, but since I've been here I've had to reconsider the definition of "delicious" with every meal. Food will sure be a letdown when - if? - I get back home.

"Sage," Calder says, after taking a drink of milk. "Tomorrow, we must not be separated while in town. Asking of the disappearances will draw added attention to us, so we must remain together for safety."

I finish chewing a mouthful of food and swallow slowly. "I had no intention of wandering off by myself, don't worry. I don't want to get either of us in

trouble, and I don't want to waste time getting lost or injured."

"Good. We will start with the shops, and move onto taverns if we don't find anything of use."

"But, Calder, I thought you told me to avoid the taverns?" They look like the best place in town to get mugged - or worse.

"Indeed, I did. I simply meant not to venture in alone. Together we shall be just fine," he smiles reassuringly while saying this.

"Okay, then it's settled." I nod and we continue eating until only a few crumbs and a couple drops of gravy are all that remain of the food that once sat before us. Calder hands Madam Golding a couple gold coins on our way out, and we head back upstairs to our room.

"We will have to get up early tomorrow to begin our search," Calder says to me as we enter. "We should perhaps go to sleep now, as it is already late." Even as he suggests it, I can feel my eyelids getting heavy and

my limbs getting weak. We've come a long way today, and I'm exhausted.

"Sounds wonderful to me," I agree as I walk to my bed and crawl under the covers. "Mmm, this bed feels nice."

Calder laughs slightly and climbs into his own bed. "Indeed, these beds are quite adequate. You do not...um...require a light to sleep, do you?"

"Huh?" I look over and see that he has turned off, or rather, put out, his lantern. He's leaning on one elbow, looking at me expectantly. Too bad I've never used a lantern before in my life. "Er...Right. How do I put it out, exactly?"

"Blow down the chimney."

"The...chimney?" What? It's a lantern, not a fireplace!

He sighs quite audibly. "The glass casing is called a chimney. Simply blow on the flame, Sage."

"Oh...Sorry." Well, now I know at least. I gently blow out the flame, but it flickers back into life. Grr. I try again, with the same results. On the third attempt, I

blow quite a bit harder and it finally goes out, throwing the room into darkness. The only light comes in from the window, leaving a small yellow square in the middle of the floor and allowing me to vaguely see the rest of the room. I see Calder looking my way with amusement at my trials with the lantern. He laughs when he catches my glance.

"Yes, Calder. I know I have trouble with your oh-so-advanced technology. I'd like to see you survive in my world. We'll see who's laughing then." Ha. I can imagine Calder trying to use a telephone...or a computer!

"I would love to see your home, Sage. Maybe someday you can show me?" Oh boy. That would be great...if I had any idea how to do so.

"If I ever find my way back to my home, then you can come visit, okay?"

"Alright. If you can't return home, I'm sure you'd be welcome to stay with Eru and me," he says encouragingly. "Goodnight Sage, I'll see you in the morning."

"Thanks Calder, that means a lot. Goodnight, see you tomorrow."

I lie here for a few minutes, wondering where my recent exhaustion escaped to. I find myself thinking of home, and all the things I left behind that I used to take for granted. My mom and dad, Callie and Aaron, all my other friends, my little hometown...As much as I love it here, I don't think I'd ever be truly happy if I couldn't go home again.

My last conscious thought, as sleep finally overcomes me, is how ironic it is: I spent so many nights at home wishing that I could come to this very place, and now that I'm here, I'm falling asleep thinking of home. Right now I'm loving this adventure, but one day I know I'll be happy to sleep in my own bed once again.

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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Another filler-type chapter, but it should get exciting soon! :)

Let me know what you think!

Thanks =]

Chapter 9

Caelevoria - chapter 9

~Chapter 9~

I can feel the soft blankets around my body and the warmth of sunlight on my eyelids. Hmm, I suppose that means it's morning. But what woke me up?

"Sage," a quiet voice whispers. Of course. I lift my eyelids ever-so-slightly, peering up through the slit at Calder's face. He's standing next to my bed, leaning over me. "Sage, wake up."

"Idonwanna," I mumble back at him and turn toward the wall, shutting my eyes tightly. What? I know I'm being immature, but sleep was so nice and peaceful, and I'm not ready to get up yet. I can picture his

blank face as he stands there, not knowing what to do.

After a few more moments of silence, he replies, "Alright. Awaken when you're ready." Is it really going to be that easy? I hear his footsteps receding from my side of the room, and the creak of springs as he presumably sits down on his bed. "I suppose Eru can wait," he adds. Damn it. He had to use the guilt trip. I didn't think he had it in him...

"Fine!" I say resignedly and turn back over, throwing the covers off of me. I sit up and knead my eyes for a minute, before looking up and seeing Calder try to wipe the grin off his face.

"That was not fair and you know it!" I glare at him, but I know that we need to get going. I glance down at my wrinkly clothes and the frizzy braids that I neglected to take out last night. I should probably neaten up if I want to be seen in public.

"I'm gonna go get ready," I say, still trying to rub the sleep out of my eyes. I slip out of bed and kneel by my trunk, grabbing my comb and a dress.

"Good, we'll eat and set out upon your return."

I stumble to the door and wander across the hall to the washroom. Shutting and latching the door behind me, I grab the pitcher off the small table and bring it over to the tub. Turning on the faucet slightly, I watch as the jug slowly fills with the steaming water. I turn off the tap and return to the table, then gently pour the hot water into the washbasin.

After the fifth or so handful of water splashed on my face, I'm feeling a lot more alive. I grab a small towel and dry off my face while untying the ribbons in my hair. I gently comb out my braids, and glance in the mirror at my wavy hair. It looks fine, so I'll just leave it down today. I replace my shirt and skirt with the dress I brought. It's a deep maroon, with the usual long skirts and wide sleeves. The bodice is form fitting, with a deep v-neck.

I walk back across the hall, knocking briefly on the door before entering our room. Calder is standing by his bed, shirtless, and he spins around as I enter. Well, he has a shirt, it's just over his face at the moment.

"Hey Calder," I say as he pulls his shirt on the rest of the way. I slip on my shoes and add, "Nice abs." He blinks a couple times at me and opens his mouth to respond, but I cut him off, "C'mon! I'm all ready to go and you're dawdling. I thought we had things to do today!" I grin at him and walk over to the door.

"Yes, Sage." He shakes his head and smiles slightly, then puts on his shoes and follows me out of the room.

After another great Caelevorian meal - thick slices of french toast and homemade bacon - we start off our search for information. As we leave the Badger's Den, we're greeted by rays of sunlight peering through gaps in the clouds overheard. The square is certainly busier than it was last night, and snatches of conversation carry across the space. I see some children playing over by the church, and men entering and leaving the town hall. Calder leads me to the right and we walk only a few feet before reaching the next building. It's two stories, and made of the same multi-hued stones as the other buildings in the area. The façade has large glass windows and a

wooden door with a window set into the top. Small windows line the second floor; probably where the owners of the store live. Considering the various food items and other household supplies that make up the window displays on the ground level, I assume it's a grocery store of sorts.

The door opens while we're still a few feet away, and a woman comes out carrying bulging cloth sacks. I look past her and see a wooden interior, and rows of shelves filled with goods. Ahead of us, to the left of the door, is a long counter. The woman walks in the opposite direction and Calder catches the door before it closes, pushing it open again. A bell suspended over the entrance jingles as the door bumps into it, and I see a man at the counter turn our way. We step the rest of the way into the store, revealing a pleasant smell of food and spices. My eyes slowly adjust to the dim lighting from the lanterns on the counter, and I can make out some of the labels on packages; mostly just foodstuff like flour and sugar.

"Hello," the man smiles and says to us, distracting me from my inspection. "Welcome to Ridley's General

Store. I'm Sam Ridley, how may I help you?" He appears to be in his forties or fifties, with a few wrinkles crossing his face. His brown hair is receding, and he has thick, round glasses over his dark eyes. He is dressed in the same style as everyone else I've seen, with simple brown pants and a white shirt. As Calder steps forward, a look of recognition crosses his face. "Hm. You're Eru's grandson, correct?"

"Yes sir, my name is Calder" Calder replies, waiting for the question that he knows will follow.

"Ah, how is she?"

Calder glances around the store to be sure of our privacy, before saying, "I'm sorry to say, sir, that she has been taken." He pauses for a moment as the look of realization crosses the man's face. "We are in search of her and the others. If you have heard any information about the disappearances, we would be most grateful."

"I am most sympathetic, but I have not heard anything recently." He continues to tell us more of what we already know; just that many good people

have gone missing and no one is sure what's happening to them. He ends with, "I have heard rumor that a warlock is the cause, but that is all. I wish I could be of more help."

"Thank you," we say to him. "We appreciate your help, but we must be going," Calder adds. "We have many more people to visit." The bell rings as Calder opens the door again, and we walk out of the store.

"Best wishes!" Mr. Ridley calls after us, and we start walking to the next store down the line.

I stare blankly out the window, letting the murmur of Calder and the shopkeeper's conversation fade into the background. Furniture shop, farm supply store, blacksmith, tanner, baker; all the same story. Tragic disappearances, good people, no one knows, blah blah blah. Everyone wants to be helpful, but no one has any way to help. We haven't even found any useful supplies yet. Now we're at the tailor's, and there's no reason for this stop to be any different. Watching people going about their lives outside is more interesting than hearing the same news again.

The children that I saw earlier are still playing outside of the church: two little girls and a boy. They're absolutely adorable, running around and giggling. I notice two women standing nearby, chatting; presumably their mothers. My gaze wanders to the taverns across the square, and I notice that they look even worse in the day. They appear almost abandoned, but now and again men wander in and out of the dank doorways. I haven't seen a single woman even go near the places.

My attention snaps back to the foreground as a tall man enters the right side of my vision, directly in front of the window, supporting a teenage girl. He's probably the biggest man I've ever seen, with a shaggy black mane and scruffy facial hair. He's dressed in tan clothing - animal skins maybe? - and he's carrying a large pack on his back. He looks almost feral, but still somehow manages to remind me of a teddy bear as he walks past. The girl is hard to see, as she's on the other side of him, but I can tell that she has long reddish-brown hair, which looks matted and filthy. She seems to be in even worse shape than her hair, with torn, dirty clothes and

scratches on her arms and legs. On top of this, she's favoring her left leg, and leaning heavily on the man. Poor girl, I wonder what happened to her...

Just as I think this, she turns to the man to say something, and I freeze in shock as I see her face. I feel all the breath rush out of my lungs, and I can't quite remember how to speak. I open and close my mouth, trying to straighten out my thoughts. Before I realize it, I'm running out of the store. I practically smash into the tall man as I come barging out the door, but I stop right in front of them.

"Callie!" I finally find my voice. She looks at me in surprise and confusion for a moment before her face lights up with a smile.

"Kaelyn!" she exclaims, "You are alright!"

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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Sorry about the cliffhanger; I tried to make the chapter longer (I have about 4 more pages written on word already), but realized that it needed to be split into separate chapters. At least I'm pretty far into the next chapter already, so hopefully I can get that uploaded soon. :)

I just wanted to thank juppjupp for (unintentionally) helping me out with this chapter (and the next).

Your questions brought some loose ends to my attention that I probably would've just ignored otherwise. Which is very bad of me, I know, so I'm glad you asked about Callie and Kaelyn. Thank you! =D

As always, let me know what you think, and thanks for reading! =]

Chapter 10

Caelevoria - chapter 10

~Chapter 10~

"Yes I'm fine, what about...Wait. What?" My mouth starts running before I realize what she just said. Kaelyn? She thinks...Oh no.

"What is 'callie'?" The girl in front of me asks. Okay, this is starting to get old.

"Er...Nothing..." I mumble. I want to ask her who she is, how she got here, how she knows me - I mean, Kaeyln...But my brain seems to have shut off for the moment. I don't even know where to begin.

I hear the door open, and Calder says behind me, "Sage, why did you leave? You should not run off on your own."

"'Sage?' Kaelyn, who is this man?" the girl says. "Why did he refer to you as Sage?"

"'Kaelyn?'" Calder looks at me, confused. "I thought you said..." He trails off.

"You look well!" she starts again, "I see-"

"Sage, do you know-" Calder interrupts.

"You have made it safely out of the-"

"These people? Why is she calling you Kaelyn? You told me-"

"Forest. Kaelyn is her name!"

"That you made up the name Kaelyn! Her name is Sage!"

"Kaelyn?"

"Sage?"

Their voices go back and forth, overlapping and confusing me further. What a mess. Every time I

attempt to answer, they cut me off with another statement. Suddenly a deep voice cuts through their argument, silencing them both.

"Excuse me, but this is not the time nor the place for this discussion. I must get Lady Marin to the physician. Her ankle requires healing." The tall man's voice is very rich and commanding, and none of us consider disagreeing with him.

"We shall let you on your way" Calder says, giving Callie - Marin, I suppose - a dirty look.

"No, we'll come along, if that's alright," I say. Now he gives me a dirty look.

"As long as you cause no problems," the man says, and we fall in step behind him. As we follow them across the square, Calder turns to me and whispers angrily, "Sage, what is the meaning of this? Why is she calling you Kaelyn?"

"It's a long story Calder." As I start to say this, I notice Marin glancing back at us, listening intently. "I can't explain right now, but I'll tell you everything later. I

promise." He looks like he wants to object, but nods and continues walking silently.

At the far end of the square the man leads us into a building much like those surrounding it. A plain wooden sign with a red cross hangs over the door. We enter into a small two-story hall with a staircase leading up in the far right corner. The landing looks down on us, revealing a long hallway with many doors. There are more closed doors to either side of us, and a woman sits at a desk in front of us. She takes one look at Callie and turns to the tall man, saying, "What happened?"

"She became lost in the woods," he quickly replies, "She has injured her ankle."

The woman opens a door next to her and calls, "Nurse Beryl, please fetch Doctor Hadley." She turns to us, and adds, "Follow me." To Marin she says, "Can you make it up the stairs, dear?"

"Yes, I believe so," she says, adding, "With help from Keir."

The tall man laughs and says, "Of course miss, I've gotten you this far."

I prepare myself for a slow procession up the steps, but Keir swiftly picks up Marin and cradles her in his arms, before following the nurse at a normal pace up the stairs. We take a left at the top, and pass a couple of closed doors before coming to an open one. We follow the woman inside the small room. It's sparsely furnished, with a bed in the far left corner, a nightstand, and a couple chairs against the right wall. A small window lights the room, making it appear friendly despite the meager fittings. The woman walks to the bed and props the pillows against the wall, then Keir gently sets Marin against them.

"You mustn't make such a fuss over me," she says to him, "My ankle is not badly injured."

"Nonsense, Lady Marin. It may not be badly injured, but it will surely become worse if you do nothing about it."

"Indeed," the woman adds, but then does a double take. "Excuse me, did you say 'Lady Marin'? As in Marin Kessler, daughter of Alden Kessler?"

"Yes," she says quickly, "That is me."

"Thank goodness!" The woman exclaims, "Your father has been here every day for nearly a week, asking for news of you." She turns to me, "I don't suppose that you are Kaelyn Harcourt, daughter of Rylan Harcourt?"

I stare at her for a moment before Marin says, "Yes, that is Kaelyn."

"Oh my, your families will be elated to hear of your safety! I will have them sent for immediately. Doctor Hadley will be with you shortly," she says as she leaves the room. Oh great, just what I need: more people who think they know me.

I try to catch Calder's eye, but he's sitting in one of the chairs looking confused and upset. I can't blame him. I just wish I could explain, but it's not quite possible at the moment. I still have to figure some stuff out and make some important decisions. The big question is who to tell the truth to. Should I pretend to be Kaelyn in front of 'my' family, or will they figure me out? And if I do tell them the truth (or part

of it, anyway), would they even believe me? And then I have to figure out what exactly to tell Calder.

After a couple minutes of silence, a man dressed in neat clothing comes in. He has short dark hair, and fairly average features. "Hello," he says, "I am Doctor Hadley. Let's take a look at your ankle, Miss Marin." I'm slightly confused at first, because I don't remember much about doctors in Caelevoria. I thought they relied on healers such as Eru. After scouring my mind for a moment, I remember a brief mention of doctors in some of the towns. They take care of minor injuries and often rely on many of the same herbal remedies as healers. The main difference, I think, is that doctors just target the physical hurt. Healers help their patients' mind, body, and soul. The doctor gently removes her shoe and feels her ankle. As he presses on one side she whimpers slightly.

"Ah, it is simply a muscle strain," he tells her after further examination. "It should heal properly in a day or two if you remain in bed."

"Thank you Doctor," she tells him with a smile. "See, Keir, I told you it was nothing."

"Yes miss, and I told you that you must let it heal or it would worsen."

I laugh slightly at their constant friendly arguments. They seem to be great friends. But my laughter is short lived as I hear voices and footsteps approaching from the hallway.

"Marin!" a man cries as he enters our room. He rushes to the bed and throws his arms around her. I can see the resemblance in his deep red hair and build, but he looks nothing like Callie's father. How odd. "What happened? Are you alright?" he asks her worriedly.

"Yes, father. I am perfectly fine. I am so sorry to have caused you such worry; it is all my fault."

"What do you mean, dear?"

"I...I was foolish. I believed that I could find Kaelyn in the woods near our home, as we used to play there together as children." We...er, they...did? I guess these girls' pasts are similar in some ways to Callie's and

my own. "I was terribly wrong. I wandered farther than we had ever gone, and became lost myself. I am sorry father."

"It is alright Marin, I am simply happy you are safe."

She turns to me and adds, "I am sorry Kaelyn. If I hadn't been ill the morning that you and your father traveled to Neme, I could have been with you. You wouldn't have been alone in the woods. When your father returned home and told us that you were missing, I felt responsible. That is why I searched on my own." Wow, Kaelyn and Marin sound just like Callie and I in a lot of ways. Marin was even sick before the journey to the woods, just like Callie at home. Everything is more confusing than ever!

"It's okay," I say to Marin. "We might have been separated anyway. And it's not your fault that you were sick, Marin." We smile at each other for a moment before her father cuts in again.

"How did you find your way out of the woods, Marin?" He looks at her questioningly.

"Father, this is Keir," she says, gesturing to him. "He is a hunter and trapper, and he found me shortly after I fell and twisted my ankle. I would not have been able to find my way alone. I owe him my life."

Her father stands and holds his hand out to Keir, shaking it firmly. "Thank you. You've brought my daughter back to me and I cannot begin to repay you."

Keir blushes, saying, "It was nothing, sir. I simply did what was right."

After this, Mr. Kessler turns back to me. "Your father will be here soon, Lady Kaelyn. Word is being sent to him at the farm. I was already in Neme today, so I arrived here first. Your father will be so grateful to see you, as am I." He gives me a hug, which is half cute and half awkward, considering I've never actually met the guy.

"Thank you," I say, for lack of anything better.

"Kaelyn, you must tell us your story!" Marin requests. "How did you come to be here in Neme?"

Uh...I don't think they'll believe the true story, so I settle for a half-truth. "I met Calder in the forest. He and his grandmother helped me, and Calder has journeyed with me to Neme. I would never have made it here without him." I smile at him as I say this, but he still has the beaten puppy dog look on his face. He must think by now that I'm quite the liar. I try to apologize with my eyes, but it doesn't seem to work. He looks away and I look back to the others.

"Thank you for accompanying her," Marin's father says to Calder.

"Yes, thank you," Marin adds, "She is my closest friend and we were all terribly worried about her."

Calder attempts a smile and fails miserably. He simply says, "It was nothing."

Nearly a minute passes before Keir finally breaks the silence. "If you'll excuse me, I must be on my way. My family will be expecting me." He approaches Marin one last time, "It was nice journeying with you, Miss. You remind me greatly of my own daughter."

She smiles up at him. "I thank you dearly, Keir. I hope to see you again soon."

"Yes," her father adds, "Maybe one day we can repay you for your great deeds. You will be a welcome guest on our farm anytime, and if you ever need a favor, do not hesitate to ask."

"Thank you. It was nice meeting you." He turns to Calder and me. "All of you," he says as he walks out the door. His footsteps fade into a silence that no one breaks.

My mind wanders back to my current dilemma. I think I'll have to pretend to be Kaelyn, but I don't know if they'll buy it. I don't actually know the girl, so it's going to be hard to act like her. Hopefully my looks, and limited time in her mind, will be enough. Furthermore, how will I convince them to let me run off again with a boy they've never met? I'll have to see how it goes.

After a few more minutes filled only by the slight creaking of springs as Marin readjusts and the creak of the chair as Calder shifts slightly now and again, I hear footsteps approaching yet again. I feel all jittery,

and I'm sure everyone in the room can hear my heart pounding. I'm just so nervous. Before I can think about it more, a man rushes into the room and envelops me in his arms, exclaiming, "Kaelyn!"

"You're safe! I have been terribly worried dear. What happened?" he asks, pulling away from me and studying my face. He looks nothing like my real father, but he has my same brown hair and my nose. Creepy.

"Um. After we were separated," I say quickly, trying to find the right words, "I found Calder in the woods." I gesture to Calder and continue, "He took me to his grandmother's cottage nearby, and then he traveled with me to Neme. I would still be lost in the forest if he hadn't helped me." I'm already sick of trying to explain everything without giving it away that I'm not actually Kaelyn.

My 'father' looks down at me happily and then turns to Calder. "Thank you for bringing her back to me. I cannot thank you enough." Again Calder only mumbles some sort of reply before going back to his silent contemplation.

The stranger in front of me smiles at me once more before turning to Mr. Kessler. "After the messenger told me the news, I sent him to your farm to tell your wife and young daughter. They will be expecting you both as soon as you are able to travel, Miss Marin," he adds, directing the last part to the girl on the bed.

"I am able to leave at any time, but I must be careful of my ankle," she says excitedly. "I cannot wait to return home!"

"Good," her father says, "We shall leave immediately then." No, no. This isn't good; I can't get sucked into their perfect little life. I have to continue my journey with Calder.

"Erm. Father?" I say quietly. The man in front of me turns back to me with a questioning look on his face.

"Yes, Kaelyn? What is it?"

I take a deep breath. I can do this...I think. "Um. I cannot return home with you." I flinch slightly at his confused look. I see the unknowing quickly turn to hurt, making me feel guilty for even suggesting such

a thing. I just keep thinking to myself, I'm not his daughter, it'll be okay...

"What do you mean?" he speaks in almost a whisper. I can feel the stares of everyone in the room boring into me.

"There is more to the story than I told you before." Calder sits up and looks interested at this point, probably hoping I'll explain everything. No such luck. "You know of Calder's grandmother, Eru?"

"The great healer?" He turns to Calder. "Eru is your grandmother?"

"Yes, sir." They both turn back to me.

"Um. She has been taken." I hear slight gasps from Marin and her father, but my...Kaelyn's...father just looks at me, waiting for more. "Before it happened she told me that I was to help in saving our kingdom from these dark times. Calder and I are journeying to save her and the others, and hopefully find the answer to the troubles we face." I say all this in a rush, then wait for a response.

He stares at me for a moment before replying, "No. No, there has to be another way. Surely one lass cannot save our kingdom? You must leave this journey to Calder. It is a man's job." I take a deep breath to reign in my anger at this last remark.

"Father, you do not understand. I was chosen for this; it is not up to me to decide. If I do not go, our kingdom may never be saved. I would rather die fighting for the people I love than sitting at home while our kingdom crumbles! I will go whether you allow me to or not, and I will find a way even if you forbid me." I glare defiantly at the man in front of me, and realize that he is absolutely terrified that I - well, Kaelyn - will never return. He's speaking out of fear for his daughter, but I can't let that stop me.

He sighs and slowly replies. "I should keep you home simply for your insolence...But if it must be done, then I will allow you to go."

I stand in silence for a few seconds. That was...easier than I thought it would be. I hug my 'father', knowing that he certainly needs it at the moment. "Thank you," I say simply.

"You must return to me safely. I do not want to lose you." I can hear the love in his voice, and I feel guilty for making him believe that I'm his daughter. I just remind myself that there is no way I could explain the truth.

"I must go too!" Marin says from the bed. What? Why would she think that? "Kaelyn is my closest friend, and I will not let her go alone this time. Please father?" She pouts convincingly to her dad, and I wait for the torrent of refusal that is sure to follow.

"That is up to Kaelyn and Calder, I believe," he says slowly. I gape at him in surprise. It's that easy for her to get permission? She must have him wrapped around her finger.

She smiles falteringly at Calder, then turns to me, grinning. "Please, Kaelyn? May I accompany you?" Calder looks between the two of us in surprise, and I can tell that he would not hesitate to refuse. I don't have a problem with her joining us, but I think she needs to know what she's getting into.

"Um. I need to speak to Marin alone for a moment, if that is alright with everyone." Calder looks worried,

while the fathers just glance at us girls before heading out. Calder follows and closes the door gently behind him.

"Listen, Marin. I would love to have more company on this trip, but I'm not-"

"Kaelyn?" she cuts me off.

"Er, what?"

She chuckles before replying, "No. I mean, you are not Kaelyn. I know. I realized shortly after meeting you that you simply share her face."

I stare at her for nearly a minute before realizing that my mouth is hanging open. I close it quickly and consider the girl in front of me. She's a lot smarter than I've been giving her credit for. Plus she just saved me a lot of time and trouble.

"Well, then," I say to her, still a little taken aback. "You know that there will be great danger on this journey. And what about your ankle?"

"I gave that much thought, miss...Sage, correct?" I nod, and she continues. "We have many horses on

our farm. I am sure my father would allow us to take three on our journey. We could travel faster, and I could easily favor my ankle until it heals."

"That actually sounds like a good idea," I say with a slight smile. "But what will we do with the horses when we reach the river?" She looks confused, so I elaborate, "We travel to the fork in the Volo River, where we will journey by boat to Altusa Lake."

"There is a large stable by the river for such occasions. We may leave them there until our return, or until my father can retrieve them." It looks like she's thought of everything. She must really want to go...

"Okay. I'm okay with you coming, but I'll have to talk to Calder. He still has a say in everything, you know." She nods understandingly. "Oh, and I would really appreciate it if you didn't say anything about my real identity to anyone, especially not Kaelyn's father. I can explain the whole thing to you later, but there is no way he would ever understand."

"Of course, your secret is safe with me," she says with a broad smile. I walk to the door and open it to find

Kaelyn and Marin's fathers pacing the hallway nearby. I smile at them and ask, "Where's Calder? I need to talk to him."

"He left," Marin's father says.

"He said he would be at the Badger's Den, awaiting your return." Kaelyn's father adds. "He is quite the serious lad. Is he often so quiet?" I laugh at his observations.

"No, he is just worried about his grandmother," I tell him semi-truthfully. I turn to Marin's dad and say, "Marin needs to discuss some things with you, sir." He nods and enters her room. I turn back to Kaelyn's father.

"I really need to talk to Calder. I will be back soon, and hopefully we will accompany you back to the farm for a short visit. Will you wait here for me?"

His face breaks into a huge grin at the mention of a visit, and he nods happily. "We will meet you here when you have everything settled with Calder. I will see you soon, darling." He hugs me briefly, then we both pull away.

"Seeya soon," I say as I walk back down the hallway. As I make it to the bottom of the stairs and out the door, I'm quite surprised at the darkness of the sky. I hadn't realized that the afternoon's events had taken so long. I can't keep my attention on my surroundings though: I may have patched up everything with Kaelyn's friends and family, but now I have to try to explain myself to Calder. I keep going over everything in my head, trying to figure out how to explain it all to him.

With my mind busy on the problem at hand, my feet carry me almost to the Badger's Den without much thought. As I approach the corner of the building, I realize that if Calder is truly my friend, he'll take whatever explanation I give him, as long as I tell him the truth.

I sigh and straighten up, feeling better already at the thought of talking to Calder. Just then, however, strong arms wrap around my body and a large hand clamps tightly over my mouth, muffling my screams. I feel my legs being knocked out from under me and I'm thrown to the ground in the darkness.

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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I tried to clear up a bunch of stuff in this chapter, but I'm still not sure if I answered questions or just made everything more confusing. Let me know what you think! If I confused everyone I'll rewrite the chapter haha xD.

Thanks!

Chapter 11

Caelevoria - Pronunciation Guide

I wasn't sure if people even needed this, but since I made up a lot of the words, I thought a pronunciation guide might be helpful. :)

I know this is a random place to put it, but I didn't want to wait 'till the end.

Let me know if anything's confusing or if I forgot something. =]

Thanks!

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Caelevoria Pronunciation Guide:

People:

Artemis (AR-teh-miss)

Bartholemy (Bar-THAH-leh-mee)

Calder (CALL-der)

Eru (AIR-ooh)

Kaelyn (KAY-lin)

Marin (MARE-in)

Towns:

Ager (AY-gur)

Amnisi (Am-NEE-see)

Crudo (CREW-doh)

Mariste (Mare-EAST)

Montisa (Mon-TEES-a)

Neme (Neem)

Tumulo (TOO-muh-lo)

Venari (Veh-NAR-ee)

Landmarks:

Altusa (Al-TOOS-a) Lake

Pigre (PEE-gray) River

Proceri (Pro-SARE-ee) Forest

Venura (Veh-NUR-ah) Forest

Vires (VEER-ays) Mountains

Volo River (VO-lo) River

Miscellaneous:

Anhelos (An-HAY-loes)

Brevisi (Breh-VEE-see)

Caelevoria (Kay-leh-VOR-ee-ah)

Valdes (VALL-days)

Chapter 12

Caelevoria - chapter 11

~Chapter 11~

One thought flies through my head as I'm falling: Get help. I open my mouth to scream again, but all the air rushes out of my lungs as I hit the ground, hard. As I land on my back, I finally get a look at my attacker: a large, filthy man with greasy dark hair. He smells strongly of liquor, and my panicked brain deduces that he must have come from one of the taverns. I finally gasp for air, but he crashes on top of me and covers my mouth before I can yell. One filthy hand covers my face, while the other gropes at the collar of my dress, trying to rip it off me. He's half kneeling on my legs, preventing me from kicking out at him. I

close my eyes for half a moment to calm down, then realize that the idiot left my hands free. Probably thought that a woman wouldn't be able to do a thing against him, hands or no. I reach up and pinch his triceps as hard as I can, using my nails to dig into the soft flesh of his arms. He grunts and pulls his hands away; just for a moment, but it's enough.

"HELP! Someone, please help me!" I scream at the top of my lungs, "I'm-" he slams his hand back down on my mouth, and I taste blood from where my lips crash into my teeth.

"None of that, miss." He growls quietly. "We wouldn't want company, would we?" He's slurring his words slightly, but he doesn't seem inebriated enough to have lost all coordination. He quickly grabs my right wrist with his free hand, then drags it over to my left and pulls both arms together before I can fight back. As he tries to lean across me while still covering my mouth, he shifts his weight enough for me to move my right leg. I pull it out from under him as fast as I can, and he nearly topples over from the sudden movement. As he catches his balance, I realize my

left leg is free as well. I pull both legs close to my chest, and heave my feet into his stomach with all the power I have. The force on his diaphragm not only leaves him gasping for breath, as I was intending, but also causes him to topple backward and off of me. He must have had more to drink than I thought.

I scramble back now that I'm free, but realize that he's between me and the town square, and getting up again.

"Help me, please someone! Help, anyone! Please!" I start screaming again, but he quickly gets back on his feet and starts coming after me.

"Come now, miss. Don't make a fuss." He tries soothing me again as he takes a slow step toward me, but only succeeds in scaring me further. Or maybe that was his intention.

I start stepping back, debating between running down the alley to god-knows-where, and trying to get around him to the brightly lit square in front of me. There's enough room to get past him, but I'd have to be fast. Which, coincidentally, I'm not.

Just as I'm about to turn and run, a dark figure comes hurtling around the corner and crashes into the man, knocking him face first onto the ground. The newcomer quickly pulls the creep's arms behind his back, roughly bringing them high enough to cause him pain. The man groans and starts trying to explain himself, but with his face to the ground, all I can make out is 'misunderstanding'.

"You shall never lay a hand on her again, understand?" my savior growls at him, emphasizing 'never' by jerking the man's arms even higher. Though I barely recognize the voice through the anger, I realize that the man who saved me is in fact Calder. The drunken man groans and shifts his head to the side, mumbling something about 'just having a little fun'.

At this, Calder actually growls at him, and lifts him a few inches off the ground before slamming him back down. The man lets out a whimper and says, "Understood. Apologies, sir; my mistake. It will never happen again."

"Sage," Calder says to me, "Come. We should leave now." I slowly walk past them, still shaking from the fright and adrenaline. I stop just inside the light of the square, waiting for Calder. With a final wrench of the man's arms, causing another cry of pain, Calder gets up forcefully and walks over to me. He gently places his hand on my back and propels me toward the entrance to the Badger's Den.

We make it inside and up the stairs, though my legs are shaking so badly at this point I can barely walk. Calder leads me into our room and guides me to my bed, and I finally collapse. I fall sideways on the bed and pull my knees up to my chest, hugging them close. Oh god. I was almost...No, I can't think about it, it's too horrible. I can't stop shaking, and all of a sudden I feel icy cold as well. Shivers wrack my body and I feel like I'm falling apart.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I think, "I must be going into shock," but all I can do is pull my legs closer and try to keep myself in one piece. I feel a blanket being placed over me, and look up into Calder's worried face. The warmth of the blanket

takes away the worst of my chills, but it doesn't soothe my horrified thoughts.

After a few minutes of taking deep breaths and trying to calm my brain, I slowly sit up, pulling the blanket around my shoulders. "Thank you," I whisper to Calder.

He looks at me and pulls me into his arms, hugging me close to his chest. It's all I can do to keep myself from bursting into tears. If I didn't have a friend right now, I'm not sure what I would do.

We stay like that for what seems like ages, but I know it must only be a minute or two. I can feel my heart slowing down and I finally turn my thoughts away from the disgusting man that we left lying in the alley. I'm afraid that Calder will make me tell him what happened, but when I look in his eyes, I can see that he knows plenty.

I laugh slightly and say quietly, "I guess this is why you didn't want me walking alone." I don't think he finds it funny.

"Sage, I must ask your forgiveness." Huh? He continues, "I should have waited for you. If I hadn't left you to walk alone, this never would have happened. I am to blame for all of it."

"No, Calder. None of this is your fault. Please don't say that, I can't bear it." The guilty look on his face makes me feel horrible all over again. "You saved me. If anything, you are the reason why I'm okay right now, not the one to blame. How did you find me, anyway?"

"I was opening the window for fresh air when I heard you call. I came as fast as I could...I thought I was too late."

"Well you were just in time, thank you. I can't even imagine what would've happened...But I've learned my lesson about going around alone in towns like this. I should've asked one of the fathers to walk me or something."

He looks at me questioningly. "'One of the fathers'? That is an odd way to refer to your father."

I guess it's time to explain everything. "That's because he's not my father, Calder." When he doesn't

respond at first, I look up at him and see a look of utter confusion on his face.

"I...don't understand." He says, drawing out each syllable slowly. "The way they all behaved..."

I take a deep breath. "Let me explain everything. But I have to start from the beginning." I just have to do it in a way that will make sense to him. Hm. "I have known about Caelevoria for nearly two years now, but I never thought that I could really come here. I have a book at home, all about this land. But no one in my world believes that Caelevoria is real."

"But Sage," he asks. "If you have a book of our history, then how can that be? Surely people can see from the book that our land is real."

"It...It wasn't a history book, Calder. It was fiction; a fairy tale." I continue as he gives me a blank stare, "I thought it was a made up world. I never even knew Caelevoria actually existed until I was...brought here, by mistake." As the words start flowing, I start speaking faster, begging him to understand. "When I first woke up in that clearing, where I met you...I actually was Kaelyn. I had her memories and

thoughts and feelings...It was only after we started speaking - when I passed out again - that I remembered who I really was. I don't know why it happened like that, but it did. So now her family and friends think that I'm her, and I don't have the heart to tell them otherwise." I pause for a moment, taking a breath. "Except Marin, she figured it out," I add as an afterthought.

I sit in silence, waiting for his response. Just when I think that he'll never actually reply to me, he says, "You...Did you hit your head...in the alley?" Great, he thinks I've lost it.

"No, Calder. I'm telling you the truth. And I thought that, as my friend, you would trust me enough to believe me. Eru had faith in me, can't you?"

"I apologize." I can see I touched a nerve with the last statement. "I know I should trust you. I simply cannot believe..." he trails off for a moment. "In your land, people believe that Caelevoria does not even exist?"

"Uh, yeah. Basically." He seems to be taking it okay. Maybe because I didn't say that someone made up his world, I just made it seem like they wrote it all down

without realizing it was real. Which, from one point of view I guess, is exactly what happened.

"And, somehow you are connected to this Kaelyn girl?"

"Yes, but I'm not exactly sure how that works. That is why her friends and family think that they know me."

"But then, didn't you approach the girl; Marin? How did you know to approach her if you and Kaelyn are not one and the same?" Uh oh. Now I have to go into the Callie/Marin thing...Which might lead to the Aaron/Calder thing. Why does he have to be so observant?

"Er...She looks exactly like my best friend from home. Again, I don't know why, she just does."

"Oh." He pauses. "I understand." Great, at least one of us does.

"You do? 'Cause I sure feel like I'm missing something."

"We must simply accept that whatever magic brought you here has done all of this for a reason. It all must be essential for our quest to save Caelevoria." Wow, I wish I could have that kind of conviction.

"Um. Okay. I guess that might make sense. So you're saying we should just go with the flow?" He raises an eyebrow at me, causing me to giggle slightly. "You know, just continue on our journey and not worry about why things are happening the way they are?"

"Yes, I believe that will be best. We shall...ahem...Go with the flow." At this, I crack up, and soon he joins me in laughing.

"Well, if that's the plan, you should probably know that Marin will be joining us for the next part of our journey."

He cuts off mid-chuckle and glares at me. "Why should that," he pauses, searching for a word, "infernal creature accompany us? We shall do fine without her!" This statement causes me to laugh even harder.

"What happened to 'go with the flow'? You just don't like her because she argued with you! And besides, she will get us horses to ride to the fork in the river, which will get us to Eru faster. Isn't that what you want?"

He casts me a dark look before mumbling his consent, and I break into a grin. "It's settled then. We're supposed to be meeting them back at the hospital," I pause, wondering if that's even the right word for the place. "As soon as possible, so we can head out."

"Tonight? Where shall we stay?"

"Um. I believe we'll be staying at...Kaelyn's house. Or 'my' house, as far as her father is concerned. It's not far, and it's on the way to the river I think. Plus we need to stop by Marin's to get the horses. They're neighbors, you know."

"Indeed. Then we must pack immediately," he says, going to his trunk. As he quickly but tidily loads everything back into his pack, he adds, "I will go pay Madam Golding and tell her of our departure. Please be ready upon my return, but wait here. Do not even

venture downstairs alone," he says the last part pleadingly as he walks to the door.

"No worries, I'll wait right here," I reply. He leaves the room and I quickly go to my trunk. Luckily I piled everything in neatly when we got here. I glance down at myself and realize that my dress is a mess; dirt stains all over and a tiny tear at the collar. Damn. I grab a navy dress in the same style and change quickly, before piling everything back into my bag. Just as I lay the quiver of arrows and the unstrung bow across the top and pull it closed, Calder walks back into the room.

"Shall we depart?" he asks with a smile.

"We shall."

We make the quick journey back to the hospital and join everyone in Marin's room yet again. After all the greetings, I turn to the fathers and say, "We're ready to head out whenever you are."

"Great," Kaelyn's father says. "I brought the cart when I heard the news, as I knew that Alden would have naught but a lone horse, and we would have

two girls to bring home tonight." He grins and Marin's dad as he says this. "It is hitched at the stable. It is a short walk, but with Lady Marin's injury..." He looks at her questioningly, but her father replies instead.

"It is fine, I will carry Marin to the stables so she does not injure her ankle further."

"Fatherrr," Marin whines at the special treatment, but I can tell from her look that she didn't like the idea of walking on it quite yet either.

As we all get ready to leave the room, and Mr. Kessler scoops his daughter into his arms, she turns to me excitedly over his shoulder and says, "I almost forgot. Am I to journey with you, S-...Kaelyn?" My eyes widen at her almost-mistake, then I force my mouth into a frown.

"I am sorry, Marin. Calder wouldn't here of it." As everyone turns to look at Calder, Marin in anger and her father in relief, he looks like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Just kidding. You can come, if you still want to," I say with a grin.

Her expression instantly changes into excitement, and she says, "Thank you both, I cannot wait to set out in the morrow."

"So soon?" both the fathers say almost in unison.

"Yes, father." Marin and I reply. After glancing at each other and laughing, I add, "Our journey cannot wait."

With that decided, we turn and leave the room, ready to begin the next step in our adventure.

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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I can't even believe I finished this chapter already (three in two days!!), but there it is. I'm actually really happy, because one thing kept leading to another, and I thought that I'd never actually let them make it out of Neme! I mean, geez, it took like five chapters! But they're finally on their way again haha.

I also want to add that I'd love comments (especially CRITICISM) on the semi-fighting scene in the beginning. I've never written a fight scene before (or been in one, for that matter lol), so I wasn't quite sure how to go about it. If the pinch-the-triceps thing seems weird...Well, I learned it in a mini self-defense course last year, so I know it actually works haha. What I'm saying, though, is that I know I'll have to have a few more fight scenes before the story is through, so I'd love comments now that could help me improve later scenes. :)

I know I'm babbling, so I'll shut up =X.

Thanks for reading & let me know what you think! =]

Chapter 13

Caelevoria - chapter 12

~Chapter 12~

After walking just a couple blocks we reached the busy stables and Kaelyn's father quickly retrieved his horse and cart. Now we're riding along the dirt road out of town at a slow pace, accompanied by Marin's father on horseback. The cart is made of rough wood, with a lantern attached at each of the front corners - lit now for the dark journey ahead. It has a long bench across the front and an open area in the back for carrying supplies...or teenagers, as the case may be. Marin opted for the back, so she could lean back and prop up her ankle, and I joined her as well. I think Calder would have been gentlemanly and

insisted that I ride up front - if it hadn't meant that he'd have to sit with Marin.

As we leave the lights of town, I look around expectantly, hoping to see what we're passing and where this dirt road leads, but the lanterns don't cast enough light to see past the sides of the road. I can't exactly ask 'my' father, as he would expect me to know this road well. I turn to Marin to quietly ask her, but she has a knowing look on her face. She turns to Calder instead, and says, "Calder, have you been this way before?" Smart; now we can talk out loud about it.

He turns to face us. "No, miss. I have only journeyed through the woods to the west of Neme."

"Well, as you know, Neme faces open grasslands to the east, but is bordered by the Venura Forest on its other three sides."

"Yes, miss. It is well known."

"Please, call me Marin," she says a little too sweetly.

"If you wish, Marin," he replies with the slightest of grimaces. She sure is good at pushing his buttons.

"Thank you Calder. As I was saying, the forest thins greatly to the north of Neme, which is why many farms are located in this area. This road was once nothing more than a game trail, but as more farmers have used it, it has become a well-worn road. If it were light, you would see much open space surrounding us, with trees punctuating the landscape periodically. We have also passed within sight of one or two farms already, and will pass a few more before reaching our homes."

As she describes all this to Calder, I keep glancing around us, trying to see past the darkness. I want to put a picture to the landscape she's describing, but it's simply too dark. After a while though, I swear I see a light in the distance, far off to our right. At first I think I'm imagining it, but it doesn't go away. Just as I write it off as some farmhouse, I see another light, closer this time and on the left. A couple more appear in the next few seconds, and within a minute we're surrounded by tiny pinpricks of light. They look vaguely familiar, but it's not till I realize that they're moving that I know exactly what they remind me of.

"Fireflies?" I quietly ask Marin, and she looks at me like I've lost it. "What?" I ask quickly.

"Fire...flies?" she asks, confused. I gesture at the lights and her face clears. "Pixies, miss...Kaelyn," she says with a smile. Oh. I guess it's good I didn't mention them to everyone.

"They're beautiful," I say a bit louder. And they really are. They look exactly like lightning bugs, except a bit bigger and brighter. I gaze at the breathtaking scene encompassing me; it seems as if hundreds of twinkling stars are scattered around us, as if we're the center of some great galaxy. The guys glance around at my remark, and Kaelyn's father glances over his shoulder at me briefly.

"You act as if you've never seen the pixies at night before," he says, laughing. I scramble to think of something to say to that, but then he adds, "Then again, you've always loved them. I remember your endless quests to catch them as a child."

"Yes," I reply with a small sigh. "I've...missed seeing them while in the forest." Technically that's true, since I didn't see any in the forests at night.

"Yes, they do prefer the open areas. You could surely see more of them if you would remain home for a time before starting this journey of yours."

"Yes, one of many reasons to stay for a time," Marin's father adds.

Marin and I exchange a look, and I say, "Nice try...We'll be setting out in the morning, sorry." I laugh at their attempts at keeping their daughters home for as long as possible.

"Yes," Calder adds, "I apologize for our haste, but it is imperative that we set out at dawn."

As we're talking, I notice out of the corner of my eye that a few lights from each side are floating slowly closer. One gets within three feet of me, and I can just make out a tiny woman - about six inches tall - in a petite silky dress, with golden-white wings. Her entire body glows a rich buttery yellow, and her delicate features are stunning.

She flutters past me, easily keeping up with the cart, and lands gently on the horse's neck. Seconds later,

many others join her as well, tangling themselves in the horses mane and sitting on its head and neck.

I look questioningly at Marin, so she says, "Isn't it odd how all pixies seem to just love horses?"

"Not especially," her father responds. "Pixies have always had a fascination with hair, but usually know better than to try to mess with a human's."

"That is true," Marin responds slowly with a shrug. She smiles at me and we continue our journey in silence. I spend most of the time gazing at the pixies, as they twist and turn in the horse's mane without ever getting caught. I think they may be the most gorgeous creatures I've ever seen.

A few minutes go by before we turn to the left and leave the main road for a smaller one. After a short distance, the road splits again. As we follow the right hand fork, Marin turns to Calder and says, "We're traveling to my farm first; then you, Kaelyn, and her father will return this way and take the left path to Kaelyn's home."

He nods in acknowledgement, and I notice that the pixies that have accompanied us this far are flying away one by one and returning to their friends in the open areas behind us. Soon I see lights up ahead again, but this time it's the warm glow of firelight.

"Home," Marin whispers quietly to herself.

We spent only a short time at Marin's house, filled with many crushing hugs and teary eyes all around. Her mom and sister, especially, were thrilled to see her - and me - again. Now we've travelled back up the road and taken the other branch to Kaelyn's farm, with me crammed between "my" father and Calder on the front bench of the cart (because it seemed pointless for one person to ride in the back).

As the horse pulls us along, the darkness slowly reveals a fairly large farmhouse, which the dirt road sweeps past before ending at a barn a couple hundred feet away. The blackness of night and the lack of lights in the house prevent me from seeing any details, so I can't wait to go in. Instead of going to the house, though, Kaelyn's dad follows the road right to the barn and stops, shifting to get down.

Before he has a chance, Calder jumps down and says, "Allow me, sir," pulling the large barn door open for us to drive inside. I guess it would make sense to put the horse away before going in for the night.

"Thank you," Mr. Harcourt says to Calder, and ushers the horse into the dark space. After unhitching the animal and leading it to a stall, the three of us walk slowly back to the house, suddenly weary from the day's activities. Everything seems to be happening so fast, it hasn't given me time to process.

"You will have time to show Calder everything in the morning, I trust?" Kaelyn's father says to me, adding, "It is currently too dark to see much of our home."

"Yes, father," I reply sleepily, dragging my feet as I follow him up the front steps and into the house. The room we enter is small and dark, but I get the vague sense of open doorways on either side of me and a stairway in front. 'My' father fumbles with an oil lamp for a few moments before the wick slowly starts to glow. I see that the doorway to my left leads to some kind of den, and the one on my right shows a dining area.

He lights another lamp and holds it out to me, saying, "Kaelyn, I trust you can make it up to your bedroom? I will accompany Calder to the spare bedroom on this floor, since my room is right next door. That way I will be able to assist him if he needs anything before morning." The tone of his voice screams 'protective father', especially because he doesn't even want Calder and me sleeping on the same floor. It doesn't matter to me much, so I nod slightly in assent and take the lamp from his hand.

"Goodnight father, Calder," I murmur as I walk forward and slowly begin my way up the stairs, holding the light in front of me.

"Goodnight," they both reply, and head off through the doorway to the sitting room.

I finish climbing the stairs and find myself on a small landing, with a door to my immediate right and a short hall leading to two doors on my left. I open the door nearest me and shine the lantern in, revealing a small washroom. I gently close the door and proceed to my left, opening the first door I come to. The room I find is a bedroom, but seems empty and lifeless, so

either it's the guest room or Kaelyn is completely lacking a personality. I can't imagine her being this boring, so I close the door and walk over to the last room. The dim light of the lamp reveals a pale blue bed and a large desk, along with a wardrobe and a couple of comfortable chairs. There is slight clutter here and there, but it's fairly neat. I'd love to investigate, but I think it'll have to wait till morning or I just might pass out. I walk to the bed, dropping my pack on the floor. After setting the lamp on the nightstand and blowing it out, I fall onto the bed without even turning down the covers. I start to wonder if I should burrow under the warm blankets, but fall asleep before even finishing the thought.

I wake up to warm light pressing against my eyelids, and slowly open my eyes to see sunlight filling the room. I slide myself up in bed and lean against the wall behind me, looking around as I do so. The light is pouring in from two windows in the wall to my left, one on each side of the desk. My eyes pass over the cluttered surface, unable to discern the contents of the desktop. I swing my gaze across the room and to the wall on my right. The plain white space is

covered with paintings and drawings, and joined only by the wardrobe that I noticed last night, which stands directly to my right.

I slowly swing my legs off the bed, and pad over to the large wooden armoire. I pull open the doors, revealing many hanging skirts, dresses, and blouses in the same style as the ones I've been wearing. The main difference is the broad range of colors that Kaelyn's clothes encompass: royal violet, deep crimson red, the palest of yellows, rich forest green, clear sky blue, and more. I fan through them, wondering if it would be wrong to take some with me. In the end I can't resist (they're technically mine, right?), so I pull a couple to one side of the closet to pack later. I close the doors and turn to walk over to the other side of the room.

As I approach the desk, I realize that the unknown desktop clutter is really a mix of art supplies and works-in-progress. I see sketches of trees and fields, primed canvases, and half-finished watercolors of horses, pixies, cats, and other creatures. The most striking work in front of me is an almost-completed

painting of a beautiful clearing in the middle of a forest. Though the colors are beautiful, and the intricate details make the work seem as realistic as a photograph, what catches my attention most is the feeling of déjà vu. A shiver runs down my spine as I realize immediately why I feel like I've been to this place before: this is the clearing that I first imagined almost three weeks ago in my bedroom, the clearing that somehow transported me to Caelevoria only days ago.

I jump as a voice says, "You'll miss your art while you travel, won't you?" I turn quickly to see Kaelyn's father standing just inside the doorway, looking at me.

"Yes, I will. Very much." I say, hoping to sound convincing. I pause for a moment, still confused about the painting in front of me. I make a quick decision and carefully pick up the piece, holding it out to him. "Do you remember what I told you about this one?"

I silently hope that Kaelyn mentioned something to her father about why she was painting this, or that

he can tell me why this clearing would be significant, but I lose hope at the look of confusion on his face. "You have not shown me this one before, dear. Where is this?" Damn.

"Are you sure? I could have sworn I mentioned this painting to you." I know I'm grasping at straws, but I need to know what connection Kaelyn has with this place.

He thinks for a few moments before his face clears. "Yes, you are correct. I did not recognize it, though. When you showed this to me, it was merely a sketch. You said that you saw it in your dreams, and described to me what a place it was. I could tell that you longed to go there." Yes! That's much more helpful. He continues, "It has developed into an exquisite piece, daughter. Why do you ask me about it now?"

"Well, father," I say slowly, making another quick decision. "I think this is proof of the importance of my journey. I dreamed about this place a long time ago, but I had never seen it...Until I met Calder in this very clearing only a couple days ago. It's a sign." I'm

completely honest as I say this, though I'm not quite sure why I decided to say all of this to him.

He just studies my face for what feels like hours, before pulling me into a tight hug. I hug him back, aware of just how much he loves and cares for his daughter. "I know that you must do this, dear," I hear him say over my head. "But I shan't like it."

I laugh slightly and smile up at him. "I know father, I know."

After my discussion with Kaelyn's father, I got dressed and proceeded to make my way downstairs. Calder, Mr. Harcourt, and I had a nice little breakfast in a sunny little kitchen off the den, and now I'm back upstairs trying to get my stuff back in order for the trip. My mind keeps wandering back to the clearing; I know there must be some connection between Kaelyn and I, and that place seems to be the link. I quickly neaten my clothes in my pack, adding a couple of Kaelyn's items on top, and pull it closed again. I start to leave the room, and take one last look around, memorizing the place. It's a cute little room, not unlike my own - in a Caelevorian way, of course.

Kaelyn seems to have a nice life here; I just hope I'm not messing it up for her.

I realize that there's no way to know what affect I will have on this place, so there's no point in worrying about it. I walk out into the hallway, closing the door behind me with one last glance at the painting lying on her desk. As I quickly trot down the stairs, Calder walks over from the den.

"Are you ready S...Kaelyn?" he asks, catching himself before saying my name.

"Yes, let's go." The faster we leave, the less it will hurt Kaelyn's father. Or that's my theory anyway. As I think this, he walks over to us.

"Are you sure you would not like me to accompany you to the Kesslers', dear? We could take the cart back up the road." The look of loss on his face is heart wrenching, but there's nothing I can do about it.

"No, father. You know it will be faster if we walk to Marin's across the fields, instead of going so far out of the way just to take the road." I pause for a moment, but then continue, trying to comfort him. "I know it's

hard, but I have to go. I promise I'll be back soon, safe and sound." Or Kaelyn will, hopefully.

"I know darling. It was just a thought." He pulls me into one last tight hug. "I love you, Kaelyn. Be careful."

"I love you too," I force out against the crushing pressure on my lungs. He slowly lets go and Calder and I turn to leave.

"Goodbye, sir. Thank you for all that you've done for us." Calder says graciously as we step out the door.

"It was nothing, Calder. Take care of my daughter for me and we'll be even," Mr. Harcourt replies with a grin.

After one last round of smiles and goodbyes all around, we finally shut the door behind us and start on our way. In the daylight, the countryside is beautiful. Lush, long green grass carpets the earth, with vibrant splashes of color sprinkled across the land where flowers grow in clusters. A slight breeze rustles the trees spread out around us, and I take a deep breath, reveling in the smell of nature. A small

dirt path leads in the general direction of Marin's farm, so we follow it away from the house. After just a couple minutes of walking, the Kesslers' farm comes into view, and we quickly arrive at their front door.

"Hi!" Marin says happily as she steps out onto the porch to greet us, wearing a rich brown dress, sturdy shoes, and a pack on her back. Her hair is plaited down the back of her head, and lies in a long braid over one shoulder. I notice that she's limping slightly, though not as bad as she was yesterday.

"How is your ankle?" I ask.

"It is feeling much better after a night's rest, so I am ready to start our journey." She smiles broadly and sets her pack on the porch, motioning for us to do the same. "Follow me," she says and leads us over to their large barn.

Marin shows us which horses we'll be taking, and she and Calder help me to saddle mine, a beautiful slender creature with a cookies-and-cream colored coat. "Her name is Gavina," Marin tells me, "and she loves Kaelyn more than any other person. Don't

expect her to fall for your looks though; she'll know you're not Kaelyn." She looks at my worried face, laughing, before adding, "She's a great horse however, so treat her well and she'll be your best friend."

We finish saddling the horses and lead them out of the barn and back toward the house. Calder leads Rowyn, a huge reddish-brown stallion that Marin says is 'a sweetheart with a fiery side', and Marin leads her own horse, Adina, a pitch-black mare with graceful features.

"Adina and Gavina are fraternal twins," Marin says as we approach the porch. "Apart from their coat, you can see many similarities in their physical characteristics, though you will realize quickly that they have very different personalities. Still, they are very close to one another, as Kaelyn and I are. It is fitting to bring both horses along for our journey." I look the horses over, and I can see the resemblance, even though their coats are so different. Examining the horses, though, reminds me of the fact that I've only been on a horse a couple times in my life, and

that both times I was being led around in a circle at the county fair - years ago. How am I going to pull this off?

Just as I turn to ask Marin what to do, her parents and sister step out the front door to wish us off. As they exchange goodbyes with Marin, I step over to Calder and say quietly, "I don't really know how to ride a horse! What do I do?"

"I will assist you with mounting, but then you will have to act as if you can ride until we are out of sight of Marin's family. Unless you wish them to realize that you are not Kaelyn." Oh great.

"Okay, I'll try," I say worriedly.

"Just remain close to me and I will help," he adds, laughing at my discomfort.

"Thanks, Calder." Just as I say this, Marin turns to us and says that it's time to go. Much to my surprise, everything goes smoothly as Calder helps me onto Gavina. After we're all safely seated atop our horses, we go through one last round of goodbyes, thank yous, and be safes, and turn our horses to leave.

Gavina surprises me yet again, by responding almost to my intentions rather than my movements. Our three horses stay side by side as we head in the general direction of the Volo River, easily walking through the tall grass.

"A real adventure," Marin says dreamily, "I can't believe we're on our way, on a real adventure." I think about that, and how my 'real adventure' actually started a couple days ago when I found that clearing. Still, having Callie - or Marin - with me now feels right, like everything until now was just a warm-up, and now the real game can begin.

"You're right, Marin," I say with a smile. "This will be quite the adventure."

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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I apologize profusely for the amount of time this took me to upload! There's really no excuse, but I had a lot

of family stuff going on, not to mention school work, sickness, and just everyday business. I promise to upload the next one quicker!

I tried to make it longer to make up for it; I think this might be my longest chapter yet :).

Thanks for reading and let me know what you think!! =]

Chapter 14

Caelevoria - chapter 13

~Chapter 13~

We've been traveling all day, following the river as it slowly meanders through the flat plains. I've had a chance to learn a lot about Marin, and found out that she and Kaelyn are quite similar to Callie and myself, though the adventures they have are quite different. I wish I could say that I've chased gnomes into their burrows, or seen a centaur gallop past my house! The woods at home are starting to seem a lot tamer than they used to.

Calder mostly just listened as we talked about our lives, interjecting a comment or chuckle here and

there. I also slowly got used to Gavina today, and after a couple hours found her gentle stride to be very relaxing. It's been quite a few more hours now, though, and I can feel my leg muscles screaming from the repetitive motion of Gavina's gait.

"Calder," I say quietly, breaking the comfortable silence that has settled over us in the past few minutes, "Are we stopping soon for the night?" The sun has been steadily sailing across the sky above us, and is now slowly descending toward the horizon on our left. The calm Volo River is starting to pick up shimmers of orange and red light on its surface, creating a mesmerizingly beautiful effect. I stare at the shifting colors for a few more moments before Calder's voice snaps my attention back to the conversation at hand.

"Yes, Sage, you're correct. I was planning on stopping for the evening in that stand of trees ahead." He points to a cluster of about a dozen trees, a few hundred yards up the river, adding, "If that is alright with you and Marin, of course."

We both nod in assent and lead the horses the final short distance before slowly swinging off them and gracefully stepping to the ground. Well, that's how it went for Calder and Marin anyway. I sit there for a moment, trying to figure out how to get down, then tentatively start swinging my left leg around. After clumsily managing to get to one side of Gavina, I quickly jump to the ground...Only to have my poor legs crumple under me and leave me in a heap on the dry dirt. Ow.

"Sage!" Calder and Marin yell in unison, and rush to me.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," I mumble quickly. I can feel my cheeks heating up already from the embarrassment. I stand up slowly and realize that my legs are alright; they just weren't quite prepared for the weight of my body all at once. Both of my companions watch me expectantly, as if waiting for me to take another tumble. "Guys, really. I'm just fine. And as you stand there waiting for me to make a fool out of myself - again - the sun is starting to set. Let's make camp before dark, shall we?"

Just as I'd hoped, my comment shakes Marin and Calder back into reality and they both look back toward their horses. We quickly unload our packs and riding gear and lead the animals to the gently bubbling river to drink after our long day's ride. We gently loop their reins over some low-hanging branches and make our way to a clear open area amidst the trees. I start organizing our packs and pulling out food for dinner, while Marin walks through the trees collecting firewood and Calder pulls out a homemade fishing line from his bag and walks off down the river.

Before long we've all settled around a nice hot fire, with plates of smoky fish and cool glasses of water from the river. Our horses graze contentedly nearby as the sun settles against the horizon and slowly slips out of sight. This would be an ideal evening if I could only turn off the turmoil of questions that swirl around my head.

Who is causing all the problems in Caelevoria? Where is Eru and is she alright? Can we reach the

elves before everything goes to hell? Will they even be able to help us? What about -

"Sage?" Marin says quietly, interrupting my frantic thoughts. I snap out of my rushing thoughts and look up at her. "Do not worry so much. It will all work out in the end."

"How did you..." I trail off at the knowing smile on her face. Her words are oddly comforting, and I feel much more relaxed. "Calder," I ask, "When will you teach me to shoot a bow and arrow?"

He smiles widely at me. "I see you haven't forgotten, Sage. Marin, do you know how to do so?"

Marin nods slowly before answering, "Yes, Calder. I know the basics, but little more. I would surely benefit from further practice."

"It is decided then: we will practice at first light tomorrow," he says with a big smile. Wait, first light? Like, sunrise??? I groan inwardly but smile in consent. After all, when else will we have the time?

"Well, then. It's dark, and we're getting up early. So I don't know about you guys, but sleep sounds pretty

nice to me right about now." I grab my bedroll and pick a bare spot not too far from the warmth of the fire.

"I will keep watch," Calder says graciously. I wouldn't have even thought of that! With all the nasty things happening, it's probably a good idea, though.

Marin and I glance at each other before saying almost in unison, "Wake one of us up when you need to sleep." We both start laughing at our little speech and the look on Calder's face. He protests at waking us, but we eventually convince him and he agrees to wake one of us up when he gets tired. With that taken care of, I curl up under my blankets and go to sleep.

I wake to a cacophony of whistles and trills; the birds around the river seem quite cheery today. I sit up and rub my eyes, noticing the sun just brushing the horizon across the open fields. I turn around and see Marin just waking up as well, while Calder sits nearby, leaning against a tree.

"Damn it, Calder. Why didn't you wake us up?" I grumble at him, still squinting against the morning light.

"I never became tired," he said calmly, but starts to yawn almost immediately. As he tries to stifle it, I laugh at him.

"Really, you always yawn when you're not feeling tired?"

"Alright, Sage...Perhaps I was tired. But I did not wish to wake either of you."

"You must sleep eventually, Calder," Marin retorts, "We must all be in good health if we're to accomplish our mission."

"Yes," I add, "we can't have you half asleep if we run into trouble. You may think you're protecting us by letting us sleep, but it will be safer for all of us if we all get a chance to get a good night's sleep."

"Alright, alright. I cannot argue with both of you!" He throws his hands in the air as he says this, finally giving up. "Tonight you two may take first watch and

wake me when you are tired. But I will only feel comfortable if you both stay up together. Agreed?"

We grin at each other before agreeing, then pull some dried fruit from our bags for a light breakfast. After our quick meal, we each grab our bows and a handful of arrows, then proceed to a spot not too far from camp to start practicing. Marin waits patiently while Calder shows me the way to hold my bow, and how to properly nock an arrow. He demonstrates the correct stance and easily drives his first arrow into a tree about fifty feet from us.

"And that is how it is done. The most important thing is to practice." Turning to me, he adds, "As it is your first time with the bow and arrow, perhaps you should aim for something closer. Don't worry if your aim is not perfect at first; it will get better with time." As he says this, Marin steps up and puts an arrow into a tree about thirty feet from us.

"Nice shot!" I exclaim. Now I'm nervous about trying to shoot anything in front of them.

"I was aiming for the tree next to it," she whispers to me. I giggle and feel much better.

"Well, at least the tree was only a few inches away! That's still a good shot!" I reassure her. "I'm sure it's better than I'll do!"

I step up for my turn and look for something easy to aim at. On a whim, I decide on a low hanging walnut on a tree about thirty feet from us, and hold my bow how Calder taught me. To my surprise, it doesn't feel awkward at all; I feel as if I've been doing this my whole life. I nock my arrow and bring my bow into position in one fluid motion, drawing the string back and releasing it with a snap. To my complete surprise, my arrow flies in a smooth arch, piercing the walnut and continuing its flight to land in the soft ground below, the walnut impaled perfectly.

"That was beautiful, Sage!" Marin exclaims, "But what were you aiming for?"

I blink a few times before answering softly, "The walnut."

They both look at me in surprise, realizing just how lucky my shot was.

"Sage, can you shoot the knot on that tree, there, just above my arrow?" Calder asks.

I look to where he's pointing, barely making out a small dark swirl on the bark of the tree. I repeat the motions of firing my bow and send another arrow whistling away. It lands directly in the center of the knot, to the shock of all three of us. Maybe it wasn't as much luck as...talent? But how can I be good at something I've never done before?

As if reading my thoughts, Marin answers, "You'll find that sometimes things will happen unexpectedly in Caelevoria, Sage."

"Indeed," Calder adds. "Many people here are blessed with gifts. You must be a natural archer!"

Woah. That's cool I guess. I've never been a "natural" anything before! "Does this mean I don't have to practice quite so much?" I ask them straight-faced, but break into a grin almost immediately. We all laugh a bit then practice some more. I love the feeling of picking a target and easily hitting it. As we continue aiming at random objects in the trees, careful to avoid the little birds fluttering around, the

sun finally abandons the horizon and starts its journey across the sky for the day. We follow soon after, packing up and mounting our horses to begin our own day's journey.

We continue on in this way for the next two days, making quick progress up the river. We eat a lot of fish and fruit, continue practicing our archery, and split the watch in half each night. I've found that keeping watch is largely uneventful, though I'd probably be pretty jumpy if I didn't have Marin to chat quietly with while Calder sleeps nearby. On the third day we get an early start, forgoing our archery for the day. Calder predicts that we're nearing the fork in the river, and after only a couple hours a small cluster of wooden houses comes into view ahead of us. A great rushing sound accompanies this sight, and before long we see the other branch of the river: a great frothing, rolling mass of water that speeds past us. It's quite impressive and not a little intimidating.

"We're riding down that?" I ask reluctantly.

Calder and Marin both nod in agreement and I sigh quietly. I suppose it could be fun...or deadly.

We ride up to the large stable at one edge of town and dismount our horses. I've become much more comfortable with Gavina over the past few days and don't even stumble as I leave her high back. I rub her nose softly as we enter the stable, realizing just how much I'll miss her on the rest of our journey. We quickly find the stable master and arrange for the horses to be kept there until we - or Marin's father - can come back for them. We shoulder our packs once again and start off toward the river guide's house.

"How is your ankle?" Calder asks Marin. I had almost forgotten, and look at her with worry, but she smiles.

"It is as if it was never injured," she replies. "The past few days have healed it completely." Calder and I sigh in relief and we continue walking.

We quickly reach the home of the man who will help us down the river, and knock on his door. The door opens, revealing a burly man about six feet tall, with rugged features and the shadow of a beard. His course brown hair is trimmed a little past his ears

and his clothes are patched and little dirty. He seems tough as he glances over us, but the smile that breaks over his face warms his appearance considerably.

"I suppose you'll be wanting passage down the river?" he asks us knowingly. We agree and he welcomes us inside. We step through the door to begin the next leg of our journey.

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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I don't really have anything to add about this chapter except I'm so so sorry! I can't believe it took me three and a half months to upload. Please forgive me!

And as always, let me know what you think! :)

Chapter 15

Caelevoria - chapter 14

~Chapter 14~

"Oh boy," I mutter quietly as I step onto the rocking boat. It's not much more than a large wooden raft, but it seems sturdy as I transfer the rest of my weight from the safety of the dock. As sturdy as something can be while rocking violently in the current, that is. The river guide, whose name we discovered is Roden, barks orders at us as he prepares for our departure. We spent a little over an hour in his house with him, poring over maps at the large wooden table in his rugged kitchen. He pointed out each of the tricky spots that we would come to on the river: the first half of our journey will be marked with

rough waters and rocky sections, until we come to the fork in the river. After that, the only thing we have to worry about is a band of bandits trying to capture our boat, kill the men, and take Marin and me as slaves. No sweat! So it's going to be a rough ride, especially because Caelevoria has been especially rainy lately. The only good part about the rougher-than-average waters is that our travel time should be cut down to just a few hours. So at least if it kills us, it won't take as long, right?

"Alright, misses, please take your seats here and here," Roden directs us, gesturing to two rough wooden benches toward the center of the raft. We carefully shuffle over and lower ourselves down onto our seats. He shows us the two long paddles tucked in front of us, saying, "These are the spare paddles I've just finished telling you about. We'll only need them, when?"

Feeling like a kid in grade school, I recite back to him, "If we get into trouble and you men need help steering." I stress 'men' ever so slightly, and Marin grins at my sarcasm.

Roden just laughs off my remark and nods. "That will be your only concern for the first half our of our voyage. Otherwise, the pair of you should first and foremost worry about staying aboard. If you fall off, it will be mighty tricky to catch you again." We exchange worried looks before he continues, "If you find yourself tumbling, grab for this rope; it may just save your life." He shows us a gnarled, knotty rope that runs the entire perimeter of the raft, secured every foot or so. I suppose I should feel comforted by this, but it only makes the threat of drowning seem more real. Marin reaches over and squeezes my hand, and I cast her a quick smile and squeeze back. We'll be fine. Right?

"During the second leg of our journey, misses, you will be our protection. Your bows and arrows are tied down on top of your packs, here." He points to the lumpy bundles covered by animal hides that are tethered directly behind our seats, and continues, "You say you're a fair shot with a bow and arrow, Miss Sage?" I nod quickly and he gives me a lopsided grin. "Have you ever tried aiming while rocking back and forth and speeding down a river before? No?

Well, lets hope it's not too difficult for you. And you too, Miss Marin.

"The current will not be as swift as it is here, but that will only make it easier for the vermin to try to board. You must not let them near us, or we may not survive this journey. I can offer some help, but we must also keep the boat from getting too close to shore or crashing on the rocks. Is everything clear?"

We nod quickly and he grins at us once again. He walks over to Calder to give him some last-minute directions, and I lean close to Marin and whisper, "Is it just me, or does Roden seem a tad bit crazy?"

"He has to be to navigate these waters! But he will get us to Altusa safely, do not fear, Sage."

"You always know just what to say to make us all feel better, Marin. How do you do it?"

She clears her throat before starting, "You see-"

"Time to cast off!" Roden yells, simultaneously interrupting our conversation and startling us. "Everyone ready?"

We all shout our affirmations and he releases the rope that ties us to the dock - our sole connection to dry land. The boat shoots off instantly into the rushing waters and Calder and Roden struggle to keep it straight. Let the ride of my life begin!

We've been rushing along for nearly half an hour now, and it's been fairly uneventful. After the initial scrabble, the men haven't had too much trouble keeping us on track. Still, we don't talk much; the guys have to devote all of their attention to steering and Marin and I try to keep an eye out for rough patches to avoid. It's actually kind of fun, though, speeding along and watching the scenery fly past. So far we've seen some average sights - a couple small farming villages and grazing deer, for example - and some not-so-average sights - a herd of pegasi landing in a field; a gryphon, feeding on a carcass, that eyed us warily as we passed; and a band of centaurs that waved merrily as they cantered past in the opposite direction. Caelevoria never ceases to surprise me with its diversity and beauty; I've found my jaw hanging open more than once.

Now we're quickly approaching the first set of rapids, as Roden warns us with a quick yell. "Hold on, ladies. Here we come!"

We crash into the rough waters, hard, and I almost lose my grip. Marin and I scoot a bit closer to the center of the boat and hold on for dear life, while the men use their paddles to steer us out of the worst of it. We drop down some low falls - only a couple feet - and I feel my stomach drop as well. Good thing I've always loved roller coasters!

We careen on in this way for about ten more minutes, almost flipping the raft once at a particularly violent spot. With a final jerk, the raft gives a great shudder and we abruptly slow down as we leave the rapids.

Roden lets out a great whoop and casts his insane grin our way once more. "I could ride these waters a thousand times and never tire of that!" he shouts excitedly. I can't help but laugh along; it was actually quite fun, I have to admit.

"Are you both alright?" Calder asks Marin and I quickly.

"Just peachy!" I say with a smile.

"Yes, that was fun!" Marin adds.

We all grin like idiots at our first success, though Roden is, surprisingly, the first to sober. "We've done well, but we can't underestimate this river; she's a feisty one. We have to stay focused."

We pay attention to the river once more as we continue our way downstream. Our steady progress is interrupted occasionally by small rapids, though nothing as extreme as the first. After nearly two hours on the river, the rough ride is starting to take a toll on all of us. I can see the strain in Calder's and Roden's shoulders and backs as they fight the current with their paddles, and my whole body aches from hanging on to my seat so tightly.

Roden calls for our attention once again, saying, "We're nearing the fork in the river! We just have one more rough section to navigate. Remember, Calder, we must take the left branch when the river forks. Ladies, as soon as we clear the fork you should retrieve your weapons. And here we are!"

The moment he finishes talking, a rock grazes our raft and it shakes considerably. The current isn't much faster here, but rocks jut out everywhere, creating a haphazard maze for the men to navigate. We almost crash into a huge boulder, but Roden forces the boat aside just in time; it's close enough that I could reach out and touch the face of the stone as we pass. I decide that I'd like to keep all my limbs, however, so I just keep holding tight to the rough wooden surface underneath me. The constant zigzagging is quite unnerving, but our trusty guide manages to keep our boat from flipping or getting smashed to bits. We finally come out into open water, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Not done yet!" Roden shouts just as we enter more rapids. I'm thrown forward and actually lose my grip, falling to the hard floor of the raft in front of me.

"Sage!" Marin screams and nearly jumps off her seat after me.

"I'm fine, stay still!" I yell back and slowly slide back to my seat. I start to pull myself back up, but another

jolt forces me back down. "Um...I'll just stay down here, shall I?"

"Is...everyone...alive?" Roden manages to ask while fighting violently with the river.

"Yes. Don't worry!" I try to sound reassuring, but another heave nearly throws me off the raft completely. I look up to see that Marin has somehow ended up on the floor of the raft next to me, and is also clinging to our former seat in terror.

I remember comparing the first rapids we conquered to a roller coaster. Well, I think grimly, this is like the world's scariest theme park ride. With no brakes or seatbelts or safety harnesses. We actually go airborne for a moment as we sail over some low falls, and I feel nauseous. We crash back into the water, and a wave replaces daylight for a moment. As it washes over us, I gasp for air and look up to make sure the guys are still okay. They're absolutely drenched, but still paddling away.

Marin and I exchange one last look of terror before a change comes over the river. It feels smoother suddenly, but we don't slow down. No, if anything we

speed up, though we don't rock quite as much as before.

"We're through the rapids, but here comes the fork!" Roden barks.

They start forcing the boat more and more to the left of the wide current, and I peer ahead to see the rushing, frothing waters form a wide ribbon that disappears only at the horizon. And right ahead of us, a fraction of the mighty current breaks off to the left to form a narrower frothing channel. As we get closer, I can feel the boat straining to follow the main river, but the men keep us on track and we get sucked into the smaller branch. The river widens as we get further down this new section, and slows down accordingly, until we're going about half the speed we once were. I breathe a deep sigh of relief before scramble back onto the bench, and Marin follows suit. We retrieve our bows and arrows from under the skins, finding them surprisingly dry, and pull our quivers onto our backs.

"Try to conserve arrows if possible, misses." Roden say. "Keep in mind that we have a three hour journey

ahead of us." We're not even halfway there! Why did I think this river ride could be fun?!

"How are we to protect ourselves without firing arrows?" Marin asks sensibly.

"Brandish your bows at them first; threaten them. Yell if need be. If they keep approaching, shoot. Aim for the legs, or the arms if they have a weapon. Or the heart or head, if you wish to kill. Use your judgment on that."

Kill? No thanks. I'd prefer not to have to shoot anyone at all. It's just sinking in that these are real people we're shooting at. Thinking, feeling, breathing people. Criminals and murderers, no doubt, but people just the same. I shudder and look at Marin and realize she's thinking along the same lines. "Legs and arms?" I ask quietly, and she nods. "And intimidation if at all possible?" Another nod. We half-heartedly smile at each other and then start looking out for bandits and thieves.

An hour!! It's been a whole hour and we haven't seen a single wretched person! My arms are cramping from keeping my bow at the ready, notched with an

arrow, across my lap. I'm starting to think this whole bandit thing is just a myth to scare us into paying Roden more. I keep my guard up though, just in case.

Fifteen minutes more and I finally see some movement in the brush on the bank, about fifty feet ahead of us on the right. We're in a calm section, and moving at about the pace of a slow jog. A perfect ambush location.

Marin and I sit straighter, lifting our bows and peering intently. We pull back on the strings slightly, preparing to scare - or shoot, god-forbid - whatever appears. When we've closed the distance to about thirty feet, a small brown head suddenly protrudes from the bush and I nearly jump out of my skin.

"Ugh. It's only a dog." The words have barely left my mouth when it starts to bark furiously at us, and we hear more rustling behind it. About half a dozen large, filthy men step out from the foliage, toting swords, knives, and loaded bows. Oh Shit.

"Stay back!" I yell angrily, trying to sound as tough as possible. Marin and I stand as Roden reaches down and frees a large knife from its hiding place, roped to

the side of the raft. Calder focuses all his attention on keeping us as far from the bandits as possible, steering us steadily closer to the left bank.

"Well what do we have here?!" The biggest, filthiest thief yells back at us, laughing. He has thick blonde hair and looks as if he's never even heard the word 'bath' in his life. I shudder slightly but keep my aim steady.

"It looks like a couple purdy girlies with only a lad and old Roden to keep them safe," one of the others quip. We're only about twenty feet from them now, and I see a couple readying a rope, while one lifts his own knife and points it at Roden.

"Aye," Roden yells back, "but these lasses are deadly shots, and you know very well I could put this here knife right between your eyes."

They laugh coldly at his claims, and suddenly I feel a bit more ready to aim to kill. Their cruel laughter is terrifying.

"Let's see you try," the one with the knife says, and pulls back his arm. Just before he can let the knife fly,

I aim and release my arrow without even thinking. It hits him right in the forearm, just past the elbow, and protrudes out the other side. He screams in pain, and before any of the others can react I have another arrow notched and ready to go. Marin keeps her aim steady and Roden doesn't even flinch. The outlaws are suddenly looking a little less sure of themselves as we draw level with them.

"If anyone else moves a muscle, the next arrow will be through his throat," I say coldly. I'm not sure if I mean it, but I can't let them know that. They all stay very still as we pass them, and I can see the hatred burning in their eyes. We all stay frozen in place as we move past, the current picking up once more.

When they're nearly out of sight behind us, the leader yells acidly, "This ain't over!" Somehow I believe him, leaving our victory seeming hollow. We round a bend in the river and finally lose sight of them.

"I'm ready to be done with this trip. Now." I say shakily.

"You did well, Sage. I would not want to be your enemy," Calder says with a smile. Marin and I laugh a little and he smiles wider.

"That was mighty impressive, Miss Sage." Roden adds. "You kept your wits and reacted well. The current will start to pick up again from here on out, as the river narrows once more. Hopefully that's the last we'll see of them." Phew, that's a relief.

"Are there any more spots we should be worried about, Roden?" Marin asks, no doubt thinking of the leader's final threat.

"There's only one more troublesome spot, misses. I'll let you know when we're approaching, but stay on guard until then."

"Can do," I reply, lowering my bow but keeping the arrow ready, just in case.

Another hour goes by with nothing more than a few birds and a rabbit disturbing the peaceful quiet. Finally Roden says, "We are coming to the other place where bandits often ambush, so be prepared."

A beach quickly comes into view on our left side, and I see something small squirming on the golden sand. What the-?

High-pitched wails reach my ears and I realize that it's-

"A baby," Marin says, obviously as confused as I am. Sure enough, it's a tiny baby lying in the sand, wrapped loosely in a blanket. It's screaming and crying: probably hungry, cold, and lonely. Someone must have left it there, alone. Who would do such a thing?!

"Roden, what do we do?" I ask him quickly; we're getting closer and closer.

"I am sure this is a trap," he says slowly, "but we cannot simply leave it there."

The men start propelling us closer to the shore, and Roden adds, "Calder, as soon as we get near, jump out and pick it up. Get back to the raft as soon as possible. We must try at all costs not to stop."

Marin and I keep watch as we near the squalling infant, while Roden concentrates on steering and

Calder gets ready to jump ship at the first opportunity. Just before we reach the shore though, I see movement on the other side. Before I can even react, something flies from the bushes. I have no time to do more than scream as an arrow speeds right at Calder's unprotected back.

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Map of Caelevoria:

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I hope this helps make up for my lack of uploads over the past few months: two chapters in three days! And this one's pretty long, at least...

I've loved working on this over the past few days; I didn't realize how much I missed it. Hopefully I'll be able to do a lot more over summer vacation. =D

Oh, and enjoy the cliffhanger. I know it's incredibly unfair!

I'll try to hurry with the next chapter. :)

Chapter 16

Caelevoria - chapter 15

Erm. *cough*. I'd like to apologize in advance for this chapter.

~Chapter 15~

Roden's head snaps up at the sound of my scream, and with lightning fast reflexes he grabs Calder by the scruff of his neck and throws him down to the deck. The arrow grazes Calder's right shoulder as he falls to the raft, tearing his shirt and slicing into his unprotected flesh.

Satisfied that my friend isn't dead, I feel my thoughts turning to white-hot rage at his injury. I quickly turn back to the bushes where the arrow originated and

scan for movement. I see the draw of a bow as if in slow motion; behind the weapon, the blonde head of the bandit leader is barely visible. My thoughts race in the fraction of a second that it takes for the thief to aim. I hesitate, not knowing whether to shoot to kill or just to injure. Before I have the chance to decide, though, an arrow plunges straight through the man's neck, killing him instantly. I look around in surprise and see Marin already notching another arrow. Without looking at me, she says, "It had to be done, Sage."

"I know, Marin," I say quickly, but my attention is drawn back to the bushes. I see the twitch of movement of another archer, and take him out with my own arrow. I know I had to do it, but my gut wrenches at the thought: I just took a man's life. I can't think about it though, because an arrow pelts at us and lands in the wood right at my feet. Marin and I quickly duck behind the seat that we once clutched for safety from the river, now using it as our only defense against the outlaws. Three more arrows thud into the raft, and one nearly hits Roden and Calder, still huddled low to the deck. Marin and I let loose a

few more of our own arrows in response. Each finds its mark, and as we keep rushing down the river, fewer and fewer arrows fly our way.

Finally the shots stop completely. "We're clear," I say in relief, and start to rush over to Calder. "Is he-"

"No!" Roden yells, but it's too late. I hear a whistling and feel a sudden jolt to my side. I feel as if time has all but stopped as I look down and see an arrow plunged deep into my right side, just above the hip. I don't even feel the pain as my legs crumple out from underneath me. I look down at the red stain blossoming across my dress, and look back up to see Roden throwing his knife right into the bastard's head. That'll teach him! I hear the splash of the body falling into the river, then blackness overcomes me.

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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Sorry! *ducks and hides from angry readers*

I had to do it, though, and I had to split it up like this. The next chapter will be up soon, promise!

Chapter 17

Caelevoria - chapter 16

~Chapter 16~

I wake to a girl's screams; oh no, is Marin alright?! I finally realize that the noise is coming from my own throat, and cut it off abruptly. I may not have felt pain at first, but now my entire torso is on fire. I choke back a whine and slowly open my eyes. I see Marin and Calder standing over me.

"Please," I whisper, "make it stop!"

"Sage, stay very still," Calder says quickly. "I have to break the arrow to free it from the wound. It will hurt."

"Nothing," I murmur, "could hurt more than-" He breaks the arrow, and the jolt makes my previous pain feel like nothing. I'm in utter agony, and another scream escapes my lips.

When I wake again, the pain is dulled slightly, though it's still worse than anything I've ever felt. "Mmmph," is all I manage to say. I slowly realize that the boat isn't rocking anymore, and open my eyes to see that the raft is pushed into the soft mud on the riverbank. Marin is standing over me, and jumps as she realizes I'm awake.

"Sage, are you alright?" I can't quite form a response, so I look around once more. I glance down to bandages wrapped tightly around my waste. Roden is standing guard at one end of the boat, and looks at me with concern. Calder is nowhere to be seen.

"Calder?" I mumble quietly.

"He should be right back, he's-" The sound of pounding footsteps interrupts her, and Calder comes into view carrying...something. My mind is too muddled to make it out.

He quickly crouches over me, looking worried. I notice his shoulder is still bleeding.

"Calder," I whisper, and his attention snaps to me. "Your shoulder. Hurt."

"It is nothing Sage, do not worry. Just lie still." He focuses my wound once more, and I feel him pulling away the layers of cloth. It brings on a fresh wave of pain and I start to black out again, but manage to stay awake this time. He presses whatever he has onto my side and starts muttering something rhythmically under his breath. I strain my ears to understand what he's saying, but can't quite make it out. After a minute or two like this, he suddenly stops and stands up.

"What is it? Am I going to be okay? Isn't there anything else you can do?" I start asking frantically, before realizing that my brain has cleared. The pain has dimmed to nothing more than a stitch in my side; it feels like I've been running too far and need to catch my breath. I look down again and see a scar between the bottom of my blouse and hem of my skirt, where my wound must have been only

moments ago. He chuckles at the look on my face, and helps me stand up. Marin gives me a big hug, and Roden smiles and pats me on the arm.

"It's good to see you well again, Miss."

I smile at them and turn back to Calder. "Calder! You...you fixed me! In like two seconds!" I find myself grinning like a fool, but I can't help it. I thought I was going to die!

"It was the Salus," he replies modestly. Huh? "A plant," he adds at the confused look on my face. "With great healing powers. I was lucky to have found some growing nearby. It was also lucky that the arrow did not pierce any major organs." Oh, a plant and some good luck. That makes sense.

"Wow, that was close! But, wait. What were you mumbling, then?"

He pauses for a moment before replying. "The plant alone would not have been enough to heal you. There are...incantations, which will aid in the effects of any medicine. Eru has taught me well in such things."

"So it wasn't just the plant! You really are a talented healer, Calder! I owe you my life. Again!" I go to hug him, but realize that his shoulder still hasn't stopped bleeding. "Should we use some of that plant-whatsit on your shoulder? You need something for it!"

"Yes," Marin remarks. "The cut does not look very deep, but it should be sealed nonetheless."

He nods in agreement, but then adds, "We will have to collect more Salus. It is a dark green plant with small, star-shaped leaves, and usually grows in the shade of bushes."

So the three of us set off into the brush nearby with words of warning from Roden. "Hurry, now. We don't want to be surprised again!"

We're only searching for about three minutes when Marin says excitedly, "I believe I found it, Calder! This?" She points to a plant peaking out from under a huge lilac bush that matches Calder's description. He nods and picks a small handful, then tries to see his shoulder well enough to press it into the wound. I almost laugh for a moment as he strains to tilt his

head enough to see the cut, but then he cringes in pain as he moves the wrong way.

"Here," I say and take the plant from him. "Do I just press it onto your cut?"

"Indeed, it is not deep enough to require anything but the plant." I lay the leaves against the wound and press gently.

"Erm. How do I know when it's...done?"

"I will let you know."

We all stand in silence for a few moments before Marin speaks up. "Perhaps we should begin to make our way back to the boat? Roden did tell us to hurry."

"Can we walk while the Salus does its magic, Calder?" I ask him quickly.

"There is no need, it has healed my wound already." I pull the plant away, and sure enough there is just a white scar where the gash once was. Wow, I wish we had this at home!

"Okay, then. Back to the boat!" We get back to the raft and Roden ushers us on board quickly before pushing off from shore.

"Should Sage and I still be on guard, Roden?" Marin asks him as we get back out in the current.

"You should keep your weapons on hand, but we are quickly nearing the river mouth. The open water of Altusa Lake is free of bandits and outlaws, so we should be safe."

I find my bow and quiver of arrows lying on the deck of the raft, luckily unscathed. Marin and I take our seats once more and keep our eyes peeled for anything suspicious as the river takes us quickly onward.

We reach the river mouth in only a few minutes, and transition smoothly from the rushing current to the calm waters of Altusa Lake. Our momentum carries us far into the open waters before we slowly drift to a stop. I take a moment to absorb the beautiful sight before me. The lake is enormous and fairly round, so the shores on either side of us curve away gently until the far end disappears in the distance. The

bright blue sky is perfectly reflected in the glassy smooth surface, only occasionally disrupted by gentle waves. The rich blue waters are populated by boats, people, waterfowl, and even - I realize with a gasp - mermaids! People in boats dart back and forth across the lake, sometimes rowing or sailing, sometimes being helped along by friendly merpeople. They zigzag between the small villages that dot the lake's edge. A village nearby seems friendly enough, and I see small children playing on the shore cheerfully. After the horror we faced mere minutes ago, I can't believe a place as wonderful as this could even exist!

"Roden," I ask curiously, "Why don't the bandits attack these people? How are they possibly safe?"

"That is quite the question, Miss. No one is quite sure, though the answer lies in these waters. They offer a certain protection to those who live here."

"Protection?"

"Indeed. Crime does not exist on these shores. Something repels thieves and criminals; it is as if they do not even consider coming here. Many believe

it is the power of the elves who live in the Proceri Forest which borders the lake on the South side."

Interesting. If the elves have the power to do all that, then I think we're on the right track for saving Eru and Caelevoria.

"Well, let's go see us some elves, then!" I say with a grin.

Roden looks at me a moment before saying, "Well? You do not think that Calder and I will be doing all the rowing, do you?" He flashes that insane grin and I grab the extra paddles with a groan, handing one to Marin. Here we go!

We've been rowing for hours now, and the opposite shore still isn't even visible. The sun's setting, and we're all exhausted and hungry. After all, all we've had to eat all day is a couple pieces of fruit and other non-perishables from our packs. We decide to call it a night and head for the shore to our right where the soft glow of a town shines through the twilight.

We beach the raft and pull our packs off of it. As we walk away, I stop and take a look back at our boat.

"We can really just leave the raft there? No one will bother it?"

"Not on these shores," Roden replies with a smile.

"Come along, Sage." Calder says as they keep walking. I jog to catch up and we make our way to the town.

We quickly find a small inn and get two rooms: one for Marin and me, and one for the men. After a hot meal and some peaceful conversation, I flop onto my warm bed eagerly and fall asleep at once.

We wake at first light - a habit I'm actually starting to get used to - and set out once more. By mid-morning our destination is visible - a smudge of green across the horizon where the Proceri Forest stands. Sometime after noon we finally reach the forested shore. I understand now why we could see these trees from so far away; they are immense! I think of the pictures I've seen of giant redwood trees that cars could drive through, and realize that some of these trees must be at least twice that size. Smaller vegetation fills the spaces between these giants, from tiny saplings and bushes to huge oaks and pines (that

still look petite compared to the behemoths that tower over them).

Roden says the town is nearby, so we pull the boat ashore and grab our packs and gear. "This is where I must leave you," Roden says, without a grin for once.

"Aw, I'll miss you, Roden! Thank you so much for taking us all this way!" I say, giving him a hug. The guy's a bit nuts, but we never would have made it without him.

"Thank you, Roden," Calder says, handing him his payment of gold auries.

"Thank you!" Marin adds with a smile.

"It was a pleasure traveling with you three." His insane smile creeps back across his face. "Except for nearly dying. I wish you the best of luck on your journey."

With a final round of goodbyes, we make our way into the forest.

"Do either of you know where we're actually going?" I ask as quiet settles around us.

Marin shakes her head quickly, and Calder replies, "No, but we should be close." No sooner has he said this than a figure appears in the trees. An elf!

I quickly realize that it's a male, and his young features lead me to believe that he's around our age, or whatever the teen equivalent is to elves. He's very tall - a little over six feet, probably - and very thin. He's got the palest skin I've ever seen, creating a sharp contrast with his inky black hair that's trimmed a little past his ears and sticks out messily.

As he approaches us, I can't help but compare him to all the elves I've ever seen in movies. If I had been expecting a drop-dead gorgeous Hollywood elf, I would be sadly disappointed, though he has a certain earthy beauty and grace that clearly sets him apart from humans.

"Greetings, I am Betula," he says, stopping a few feet away from us. "Welcome to Ora. What is it that you seek?"

He addresses Calder as he says this, so I take a small step forward before replying. "My name is Sage, and this is Marin and Calder." A look of understanding

crosses his face as I continue. "We've come in search of Calder's grandmother-"

"Eru, yes. We have been expecting you," the elf interjects. "Follow me."

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Map of Caelevoria:

http://i35.tinypic.com/2s6qbrd.jpg

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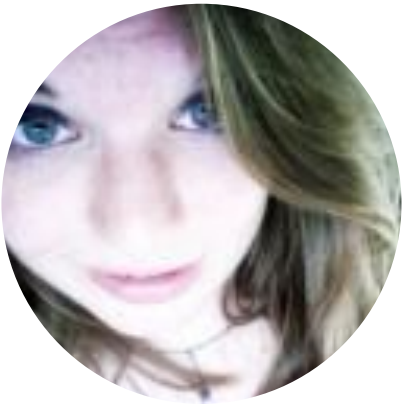
Four chapters in a week...I hope this makes up for my long absence! :)

About the Author



Gennie